





THE TRAIL BOYS OF THE PLAINS



When the rifle spoke the huge head of the buffalo
was almost under Poke's belly (Page 253)

THE TRAIL BOYS OF THE PLAINS

OR

THE HUNT FOR THE BIG BUFFALO

BY

JAY WINTHROP ALLEN

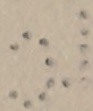
ILLUSTRATED BY
WALTER S. ROGERS



NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

A427
T

COPYRIGHT, 1915
By DODD, MEAD & COMPANY



\$1.00

OCT -6 1915

© Cl. A 410874

no. 1.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	SOMETHING ABOUT A BIG BUFFALO	I
II	AT THE SILENT SUE	12
III	THE LAME INDIAN	22
IV	THE ROCKING STONE	33
V	THE BEARS' DEN	46
VI	IN THE OLD TUNNEL	56
VII	THE RESCUE — AND AFTERWARD	65
VIII	CHET SHOOTS A HAWK	79
IX	ON THE TRAIL TO GRUB STAKE	93
X	MR. HAVENS HAS A VISITOR	109
XI	THE FIRST ADVENTURE	116
XII	A MAVERICK	124
XIII	"THE DOG SOLDIERS"	139
XIV	THE WARNING	149
XV	"WHAT WON'T BE LED MUST BE DRIVEN"	159
XVI	THE WOLF RING	174
XVII	A MYSTERY	186
XVIII	ROYAL GAME	198
XIX	A FRUITLESS CHASE	208
XX	A MIDNIGHT ALARM	218

Contents

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXI	A STARTLING DISCOVERY	227
XXII	AFTER THE THIEVES	236
XXIII	THE FIRST BUFFALO	250
XXIV	TIT FOR TAT	263
XXV	CHET'S DETERMINATION	272
XXVI	"THE KING OF THEM ALL!"	283
XXVII	DIG'S GREAT IDEA	295
XXVIII	GREAT LUCK	306
XXIX	PLENTY OF EXCITEMENT	317
XXX	HOW IT ENDED	328

ILLUSTRATIONS

When the rifle spoke the huge head of the buffalo was almost under Poke's belly (Page 253)	<i>Frontispiece</i> ✓
	FACING PAGE
Dig spurred his horse over to the place and leaped down to give his chum a helping hand	42 ✓
Then Chet saw the bear—a big black fellow, standing erect	120 ✓
They fairly “wolfed” the venison steaks	192 ✓

THE TRAIL BOYS OF THE PLAINS

CHAPTER I

SOMETHING ABOUT A BUFFALO

"Do you really suppose such a buffalo exists?" queried Chet Havens, who was braiding a whip-lash.

"You've got me there, boy," said his chum, Dig Fordham, trying for the hundredth time to carve his initials in the adamantine surface of the old horse-block, and with a dull jackknife.

"By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland! wouldn't it be just the Jim-dandy adventure, Chet, if we could go out after this herd and capture the king of them all? It would be *great!*"

"It would be great enough, all right," admitted Chet, nodding. "But it would be some contract to capture such a bull. According to all accounts he must be as strong as an elephant and almost as big."

"Whew! do you think so, Chet?"

"If he measures up anywhere near to the specifications that Tony Traddles gave us last week."

"Oh — Tony!" returned Dig, in disgust. "If

he saw a lizard sitting on a log in the sun he'd declare it was the size of a crocodile."

Chetwood Havens laughed. He was a nice-looking, fair-haired boy with grey-blue eyes and long, dextrous, capable hands. He braided the thongs without giving them more than a casual and cursory glance.

He was a tall boy, and slender, but with plenty of bodily strength. Digby Fordham was more sturdily built. He was square-set, broad-shouldered and thick-chested; and he had a broad, good-humoured face as well. His black hair was crisp; he had little, twinkling eyes; and usually his countenance wore a smile.

"Well," Chet went on to say, following his chum's criticism of Tony's report, "there was Rafe Peters. Rafe is an old hunter, and he ought to know what he's talking about when he says it's the biggest bull buffalo that he ever saw."

"Aw — all the buffaloes have gone up into Canada, somewhere," growled Dig.

"No. I expect there are stray herds — small ones — hidden away in the mountains. Something or other has driven this herd out upon the plains. I heard some of the men talking about making up a

party to go out and shoot 'em; but they are all too busy just now in the mines."

"I reckon Rafe was just trying to string us," said Dig.

"You're a Doubting Thomas," laughed his chum.

"Well, why shouldn't I be? I've heard tell of buffaloes ever since I was knee-high to a tin whistle, and never a buffalo sign have I seen yet — 'cept those mangy old robes father's got in the barn. I'm beginning to be like the old farmer that went into the menagerie and saw the giraffe. After he'd stared at it for an hour he shook his head, and said, 'Drat it all! there jest *ain't* no such animile!'" and Dig chuckled.

Chet was reflective. "Strange how all those creatures have disappeared from the western plains, where they were once so plentiful," he said. "Pete was telling me that he was once hired by a government expedition to keep the men supplied with fresh meat, and that he often shot two and three hundred buffaloes in a single day."

"Whew!"

"And he was only one white hunter who worked at that time on the herds. Some just killed the beasts for their hides — and the hides were as low

4 The Trail Boys of the Plains

as a dollar apiece at one time. Then, the Indians slaughtered hundreds of thousands uselessly. Why, Dig! I was reading the other night that when the first Spaniards came up from Mexico across the Great Staked Plains, they had to fairly push their way through the buffalo herds."

"Whew!" said his chum again. "When was this, Chet?"

"Some time before you were born, boy," returned Chet, dryly.

"Did you ever *see* a buffalo?" demanded Dig, suddenly.

"Yes, at Nugget City when Wolfer Ben's Wild West showed there. He had a bull and three cows; and lots of old plainsmen went to see the show just because of the buffaloes. They hadn't seen any of the creatures for a couple of decades."

Dig was still chuckling. "Tell some eastern folks that and they wouldn't believe you. You know, I've a cousin Tom down Boston way, and he's always writing and saying he wants to come out here."

"I've heard you speak of him."

"Yep. Well, every time Tom gets mad with the folks at home, or sore on the school he goes to,

or the teachers, he writes me and says he's going to run away and come out here. And he wants to know what kind of guns and ammunition he'll have to buy, and if he'll have to wear a bowie-knife and two pistols stuck in his belt. He, he!"

"He must be a blockhead," said Chet, in disgust. "What does he think Silver Run is?"

"Well, I tell you," proceeded Digby, "it's partly my fault. At first I told him the truth — that we had churches and schools and a circulating library, and folks took a bath Saturday nights, if they didn't oftener, and wore boiled shirts on Sunday; and that a man who wore a pistol in his belt would be taken in by the constable and examined as to his sanity.

"But that didn't suit Tom — oh, no! He said he knew I was kidding him."

"He did?"

"That's what! So I got sick of being disbelieved, and I began to write him the sort of stuff he wanted. I told him about the Comanches attacking the town and we beating 'em off with great slaughter."

"Dig Fordham! How could you? Why, we haven't seen a bad Indian in years."

"Never mind. That's what Tom wanted me to

6 The Trail Boys of the Plains

tell him. I told him all the miners wore red flannel shirts, and went about with their pants tucked into their boot-tops, and that they wore pistols in their belts, and bowie-knives in their boots — By the way, Chet; what is a bowie-knife?"

Chet laughed. "A kind of long-bladed hunting knife, ground to an edge on both sides of the point, and invented by Colonel James Bowie, of Texas. I got that out of an encyclopædia."

"Well, Tom knows all about 'em. I hope he comes out here some time, togged up in the way he thinks we dress at Silver Run. If he does, I know he'd scare a corral full of ponies into fits!" and Dig went off into another spasm of laughter.

The boys had gotten off the subject of the strange buffalo herd that had appeared on the open plains between Silver Run and Grub Stake, a second silver mining town, deeper in the Rockies. Before Dig recovered from his laughter at his own humorous conception of his cousin's appearance at Silver Run, Chet started up into a listening attitude.

"What you cocking your ears for, Chet?" demanded Dig. "What's got you?"

"Who's this coming?" demanded Chet, holding up his hand.

When the boys were silent they could hear the pounding of heavily shod feet on the hard road. The Havens lived on the outskirts of Silver Run, and the road to the mines passed by their corral fence.

Chet sprang up, and even the slower Digby showed interest. The pounding feet were coming rapidly nearer.

The boys ran around the corner of the high board fence to the edge of the road. There, coming down the hill, and out from the belt of timber that surrounded the mountain above the town, was a man in yellow overalls and cowhide boots. He was without a cap, his shirt was open at the throat, and every indication about him showed excitement.

“Goodness!” gasped Chet. “What can that mean?”

“It’s Dan Gubbins — and he’s so scared he can’t shut his mouth!” observed Dig.

This seemed true. Dan Gubbins ran with his mouth wide open and fear expressed unmistakably in his rugged features. He was one of the men working in the mine in which Mr. Havens and Mr. Fordham were interested.

8 The Trail Boys of the Plains

"Hey, Dan! what's the matter?" shouted Dig, as the big miner came closer.

"She's caved!" croaked the man, his throat so dry he could scarcely speak.

"Who's caved?" demanded Dig.

"What's caved?" asked Chet, better understanding the vernacular.

"The Silent Sue! She slumped in like rotten ice in February!" gasped the big miner, leaning against the fence near the boys. "Oh, my Jimminy! It's awful!"

Chet turned pale. Dig reddened and gulped back a sob with difficulty.

"You—you don't mean the mine's all caved in?" stammered the latter.

"The shaft," replied Dan.

Chet, the practical, demanded:

"How many are caught in the cave-in?"

"There's five down there, besides —"

Dan halted and stared at the boy with sudden apprehension. Then, after a moment, he whispered:

"My golly, Chet! whatever am I to tell your mother? Yer dad's down there with 'em!"

"Father!" exclaimed Chet, seizing Dig's hand.

"Is my father in it too?" cried Dig, ready to burst into tears.

"Mr. Fordham warn't there noways," said Dan, getting his breath and able now to speak more intelligibly. "Whatever am I to tell your mother, Chet?" he repeated.

"You won't say anything to her, Dan," replied the boy, firmly. "I'll tell her myself. But give me the particulars. We want to know how it happened. Isn't there any hope? Can't we get at them down there?"

"Dunno," returned the miner. "Rafe Peters is in charge, and they are digging like prairie-dogs to get down into the gallery. Everybody down there is all right so fur. Ye see, it was like this: There was a blast goin' to be shot in Number Two tunnel. Ye know where that run to?"

Chet nodded. "Over toward the old Crayton Shaft—that's open now—on the other side of the mountain. Father was saying the other day that the Silent Sue's Number Two must be getting pretty near the old diggings."

"That's it," said Dan Gubbins, nodding, and wiping his moist forehead with the back of a hairy hand. "Well, they got ready that shot, which was

a heavy one. The timbering of the lower part of the shaft didn't suit Mr. Havens and he told Tony to put in new cross-braces and some new planks."

"Tony Traddles?" demanded Chet.

"Yes. An' he oughter be jailed for what he done," added the miner, bitterly.

"How was that?" queried Digby, his eyes big with interest.

"Mr. Havens," pursued the miner, "went down to see that all was clear in the tunnel before the shot. He sings out to Tony and asks if the timbering was all right; and the lazy rascal said 'twas."

"And wasn't it?" snapped Chet, his eyes blazing.

"No. He'd come up to fill and light his pipe and hadn't blocked and wedged his cross-beams. There was five of the boys 'sides your father in the tunnel, and when the shot went off the shoring at the bottom of the shaft shook right out and she caved in! It was awful! I wonder you didn't hear the rumble of it. And what I'm goin' ter say ter your mother, Chet —"

"You're going to say nothing to her, Dan," repeated the boy. "I'll tell her. You go and get a doctor, or two, Dan — and all the other help you

can. You saddle Hero and Poke, Dig. We must get up to the mine in a hurry. I won't be in the house long."

He turned quickly away and started for the back 'door of his home. The others did not see his face.

CHAPTER II

AT THE SILENT SUE

THOSE few yards between the corral and the back door of the Havens' pretty home in the Silver Run suburb, were the hardest steps Chet had ever taken. For his age he was naturally a thoughtful boy, and he had been impressed by the manner in which his father ever shielded the delicate, gentle mother from all the rough things of life. If there was an accident in the mine, Mr. Havens seldom mentioned it before his wife, and never did he repeat the particulars.

Chet had seen and understood. He knew that his mother was not to be troubled by ordinary things if it could be helped. Of course, she must know of his father's danger; but the news must be broken to her carefully. He could not allow rough but kind-hearted Dan Gubbins to go in with his story of the accident at the Silent Sue claim.

As he entered the sewing-room where his mother was engaged at her work, she looked up with a little smile on her face.

“What’s wanted, Chetwood?” she asked.

She was a small woman, with a very delicate pink flush in her cheeks and bands of prematurely grey hair above her forehead and over the tops of her ears. Chet often said, laughingly, that if he ever wanted to marry a girl, he’d wait to find one who wore her hair just like his mother wore hers.

“What’s wanted, Chetwood?” she repeated, as the boy remained silent after quietly closing the door. Then she saw his troubled face and the work on which she was busied fell from her hands and, from her lap, slipped to the floor as she slowly rose.

“Chetwood! My son! your father —?”

Her cry was low, but it thrilled Chet to the heart. He sprang forward to seize her shaking hands. He knew that she was ever fearful when Mr. Havens was in the mine.

“It’s not so bad as all that, Mother! Wait! don’t believe the worst!” begged the boy, his voice choked with emotion.

“He — he isn’t killed?”

“Not a bit of it! There’s been a — a little accident. Father is down there with some of the other men.”

“Down where?” she asked sharply.

14 The Trail Boys of the Plains

“In Number Two drift. There was a cave-in. Of course they’ll get them out. Old Rafe Peters is on the job already with a gang. I’m going right up there.”

“Oh, Chet! Are you *sure* that is all? They are still alive?”

“Of course!” cried the boy, with strong conviction and even calling up a smile. “Dan Gubbins came down to bring the news and get some more men. Dig and I are going to ride right up.”

“Where is Digby’s father?” queried Mrs. Havens anxiously.

“He didn’t happen to be there when the cave-in took place. But he’s probably there now. We’ll get at them all right. Don’t you fear, Mother.”

“Oh, but my son! I shall be fearful indeed until I know your father is safe. I am always afraid when he is in the mine. The men take such chances!”

“Well, the Silent Sue has not recorded many accidents. Father and Dig’s father are both very careful. Now, Mother, don’t worry any more than you can help. I’ll send down word just as soon as we know anything for sure.”

He kissed her — and kissed her cheerfully. That

was the hardest part of his mission, for he, too, was greatly worried. Then he seized his cap and quirt and hurried out to the corral. Dig Fordham had, for once, been prompt. He held Chet's handsome bay, Hero, by the bridle, while his own sleepy-looking, Roman-nosed Poke was cropping grass at the edge of the road.

"Come on, Dig!" Chet cried, hastily jerking the reins from his chum's hand. "We must hurry."

"Did you tell her?" whispered his chum, awe-struck.

"All she needed to know now," snapped back Chet. "Look alive!"

He was astride of Hero in a moment and the noble animal took the trail without urging. Dig whistled for Poke. Then he whistled again. The ugly, sleepy-looking animal stopped for just one more bite.

"Isn't that just like you, you ornery brute!" growled Digby. "If ever I wanted you in a hurry you wouldn't mind. Come on!"

He jumped for the horse, caught at the trailing bridle, and Poke stood on his hind legs and pawed the air, his eyes suddenly afire, striving to wheel about and escape Dig's clutching hand.

16 The Trail Boys of the Plains

Digby Fordham wasn't afraid of any horse. He sprang right in under the pawing hoofs, and seized the dangling reins. His hold was secure; his wrist firm. At his first jerk Poke's head came down and, naturally, the horse's forefeet as well.

The instant the hoofs struck the ground, and before Poke could begin any further display of antics, Dig was in the saddle. Chet, looking back over his shoulder as Hero set the pace up the mountain, saw that his chum was securely astride Poke. Give Dig both feet in the stirrups, and no horse living could dismount him. He rode as though he were a part of the horse.

Digby and Poke were not always in accord, but Poke was tireless and carried the heavy boy as though he were a feather-weight. Poke could go without food and water much longer than most mountain-bred mustangs. Dig declared there must be a strain of camel in him. But there was not an attractive thing about the brute, either in temper or appearance.

In a minute he was neck and neck with Hero, and both horses were carrying their young masters up the slope at a fast pace. Dig grumbled:

“This old rascal always cuts up when I want him

in a hurry. I'm going to trade him off for a horned toad, and then use the toad for a currycomb. Your Hero is a regular lady's horse 'side o' him."

"You know you wouldn't take any money for old Poke," returned Chet, reaching out and smiting the black across his ugly nose with his own palm. "Why do you give him a chance to get away from you?"

"Because hope springs eternal in my breast," declared Dig, who would joke under any and all circumstances. "I'm always hopin' I've got the rascal broken of his bad habits."

Chet was not in a mood for laughter; nor was his chum careless of thought. He really hoped to get Chet's mind off the mine accident. It might not be anywhere near so bad as Dan Gubbins had said.

Mining at Silver Run was now carried on with much more care for human life than it had been when the claims were first staked out and the original owners had begun to get out "pay dirt." Mr. Havens was a practical engineer, a graduate from a College of Mines, and with a long experience at other diggings before he had obtained a controlling interest in the Silent Sue.

It was a mine the stock of which had never been

18 The Trail Boys of the Plains

exploited in the eastern market. Mr. Fordham and Mr. Havens had always been able to obtain sufficient capital to buy machinery and improve their methods of getting out the ore; and they found the Silent Sue too steadily productive to need any other partners.

Mr. Havens owned, also, a second claim near the first that might some day develop into a rich one.

When the two chums rode up to the collection of rude miners' cabins, sheds, the stamp-mill, and other shanties that surrounded the mouth of the mine-shaft, they found a crowd already gathered. Men and women alike were commingling excitedly about the shaft in which the rescue party was at work.

A big, bushy-whiskered man in yellow overalls and a tarpaulin hat was urging on the workers, and trying to keep the women and children back from the open mouth of the pit.

"Oh, Rafe!" cried Chet, throwing himself out of the saddle and running up to the mine boss. "Are they down there yet?"

"They're all right so fur, Chet," declared the man.

"Can you get them out?"

"I kin try — and that's what I'm doin'," the mine boss said huskily. "Thirty foot of the bottom of the shaft's caved in. It's caved from all four sides. We're diggin' out the earth and rubble and sendin' it up by the bucket-load. Fast as we kin, we're replacin' the timbering. That's the best we can do."

Chet had a quick mind and he knew a good deal about such accidents, although there had been nothing like this at the Silent Sue since he could remember.

"You can't work a big gang in the shaft, Rafe," he said anxiously. "How long will it take 'em to get down to the bottom and into the side tunnels?"

"I dunno, boy, I dunno," the old man said, plainly worried. "But we're workin' jest as fast as ever we can. I'm shiftin' the men ev'ry two hours and they're all puttin' in their very best licks."

"You haven't heard — heard from fa-father?" gasped Chet, trying to control his voice.

"Golly! No, boy!" exclaimed the mine boss. "Thar's thirty foot of rubble, I tell yer, at the bottom of the shaft. If they was hollerin' their heads off we wouldn't hear 'em yet. The fall of earth and stuff is packed like iron."

"Oh, it'll be all right, Chet! It'll be all right," urged his chum, who had come up after hitching the two mustangs.

Dig's father had not as yet arrived. Nobody seemed to have much head about him but old Rafe. But perhaps nobody could do much. Chet stared at his chum and the mine boss hopelessly.

"Why, see!" he gasped. "It may be a week before you can clear the bottom of that shaft — it may be longer! What will father — and the others — do all that time? Oh, Dig! it's awful — it's *awful*! They'll starve to death!"

"Whew! I hadn't thought of that," muttered Digby Fordham.

Old Rafe Peters shook his head. He was keeping his eyes on the buckets of "rubbage," as he called it, that were being swiftly brought to the surface by the steam winch. He had excavated the lower end of the shaft himself and he knew the strata of earth through which it passed. By the colour of that which came up in the buckets, he knew the diggers had not gone far as yet.

One bucket went down as the other came up. It was not down three minutes before the signal rang for it to be hoisted again. But thousands upon

thousands of buckets of debris would have to be hoisted out of the shaft ere the way would be opened into tunnel Number Two, lower level, in which Mr. Havens and the miners were entombed.

CHAPTER III

THE LAME INDIAN

THE five men shut in the mine with Chet's father were all married and their wives and children made the noisiest group of all at the mouth of the Silent Sue mine. The rough men standing about tried to comfort them; but there was not much of a comforting nature to say.

There were plenty of men for the work of rescue; indeed, there were so many in each two-hour shift that they got in each other's way. Chet Havens had put the situation concisely and to the point: It would take more than a week to dig down to the opening of Number Two tunnel; meanwhile, how would the entombed miners live without food or water?

Mr. Fordham had not returned and there was nobody for the two boys to confer with. The mine foreman was doing all that seemed possible. It was a question whether what he did was of much use.

Six men in a stoppered tunnel, with no ventila-

tion and nothing to eat or drink, were not going to live long. Chet doubted if any of them would be alive at the week's end.

"Wait till father comes," Dig said, almost sobbing, and seeing how badly his chum felt. "Perhaps he'll know some other way to get into that drift."

"What way?" demanded Chet. "He doesn't know any more about the mine than we do."

"Maybe from the old upper level —"

"Bah! you know better," Chet said sharply. "The pay-streak they followed first in this mine is only fifty feet down. It petered out before your father and mine bought into the Silent Sue — you know that, Dig.

"No chance! The two levels have never been connected, save by the shaft itself. Your father can't dig any faster than these men are digging. If there were only a way —

"Say, Dig! there's the Crayton Shaft. Don't you remember it? Father told me the Number Two tunnel on the lower level was pretty close to the old Crayton diggings. He always said that if the Crayton people had kept on, they'd have struck pay-ore again. But they got cold feet and father

bought a share in the claim cheap. Now there's been a fellow around after it. I heard father talking about it."

"What good will it do to go down the Crayton shaft?" demanded Dig hopelessly.

"I don't know — I don't know," admitted Chet. "But I can't stand here idle. I'll go crazy — *crazy!* I must do something! Maybe the wall between the tunnel of the Crayton mine and our Number Two is not very thick. I've got a compass, and I know this hill like a book. So do you. Let's take a pick and shovel and ride over there."

"Oh, Chet! I'm afraid you're stirring yourself all up over nothing," returned his chum. "I'll help you, of course; but I'm afraid it won't help us any to go over there."

"We'll not know till we try."

"Will you take some of the men to help us?"

"Two can do all that can be done," answered Chet, rather shrinking from taking even Rafe Peters into his confidence. It seemed such a forlorn hope!

"If the blast went off at the end of the tunnel, it'll be full of rubbish and take a lot of digging to get through it."

"No. Our tunnel isn't going head-on into the Crayton drift. I understood father to say that Number Two tunnel passed the old diggings by. My goodness! if he only remembers it, and knows just where the Crayton tunnel is, maybe he and the boys will start digging that way at once. Come on, Dig! Let's ride over."

Chet ran to the tool shed and seized a pick and shovel; the latter he tossed to his chum and then sprang astride Hero with the pick in his hand. This time his friend had no trouble in getting Poke, for he had fastened that uneasy animal.

There was so much excitement around the mouth of the shaft that nobody noticed the two boys riding away into the woods trail. They knew the way perfectly. Indeed, there were not many trails in the vicinity of Silver Run and the mountain that towered over it which were not familiar to Chet Havens and Dig Fordham.

This mountain had been deeply scarred by the miners of the old days. One side of the hill had been eaten away by the hydraulic mining which was carried on when gold was first discovered here. How much of the rich silver ore, which the early prospectors did not recognise, had been wasted in

26 The Trail Boys of the Plains

the first excitement of finding gold, will never be known.

For this really was a hill of silver. The veins of ore streaked it like the arteries in a human body. The Silent Sue claim chanced to contain seemingly exhaustless veins; while the old Crayton mine soon petered out.

Once the wall of the forest had shut out the view of the shaft buildings, the boys were likewise out of sight of all human habitations. The old trail was rough and in places washed away, or filled up with leaves or other litter.

Now and again as they rode along they came to deep excavations in the hillside, old pits which had been abandoned almost as soon as dug. There was neither gold nor silver in these places, although the indications on the surface had toled the early miners on to make the excavations.

At first the prospectors had been after gold, and gold alone. The gold dust was mixed with a black, rotten ore that the early miners did not recognise as sulphuret of silver, which is nothing more than the pure metal in a decomposed state. The prospectors complained loudly of the "nuisance" of this black stuff. It was worse than the black sand

found always in gold diggings, for such sand does not interfere with the amalgamation of the gold ore.

This "black stuff" interfered with the mining of gold, and the diggings got a bad name because of it. It was some years after the cessation of gold digging in the mountain above Silver Run (which was not then on the map) that the nature of this rotten silver ore began to be understood. The Comstock Lode had then excited world-wide attention, and men who had been among those who had worked the claims on this mountain remembered that the same kind of ore that proved so rich in the Comstock claim had been thrown aside and anathematised by the miners in these old diggings.

So there was another "rush." Silver Run was established. In some relocated claims the silver ore was seen to be almost inexhaustible, as in the Silent Sue, the mine owned by the fathers of Chet and Digby.

Silver Run had become a town of some importance. There were other industries besides mining. It was a well governed town, and although on the verge of the wilderness it had easy communication with cities in a more advanced state of civilisation.

When the boys were about two miles from the Silent Sue mine, they came upon one of the abandoned camps. There was little left to mark its occupancy by the prospectors of the old regime save several caved-in shafts and some rusted, corrugated-iron shacks.

From the rusty stove-pipe chimney of one of these, smoke was curling, and Digby said:

"I bet that's where the lame Indian hangs out. You know, he's old Scarface's grandson."

"I know. John Peep. That's what the boys used to call him when he came to school."

"You don't want to call him that to his face," chuckled Dig. "It makes him madder'n a hen on a hot skillet. He's got some fancy Indian name that he prefers to be called by. Oh, he's a reg'lar blanket Indian—and Scarface does odd jobs of cleaning out cellars and whitewashing!"

"Poor fellow!" said Chet, scarcely giving his mind to the matter of the Indian youth. "It must be tough to limp around on a game leg. One's shorter than the other. You don't often hear of a lame Indian."

"No. Father says that in the old days if an Indian baby was born deformed they got rid of it

right away. And when Indians used to fight they fought so hard that they usually killed each other. That's why there were seldom cripples among them.

"But this chap — Ah! there he is."

A figure appeared at the open door of the shack. It was that of a tall, slim boy, very dark, with red under the skin on his cheekbones, and straight, long black hair. His "scalp lock" was braided; the rest of the hair was well greased and hung to his shoulders.

The shoulders of the Indian youth were bare. Indeed, he wore nothing at all in the way of a garment above his waist. Dig waved his hand to the Indian, and shouted:

"Hello, John! You livin' up here all alone?"

The Indian youth made no immediate reply, but walked out to the trail on which the boys were riding. Chet was impatient of delay, but Dig pulled in his horse. The lame boy stepped between the chums and Chet looked back, restraining Hero.

"What are you boys doing up this way?" asked John.

"We're in a hurry," said Chet quickly. "Going over to the Crayton shaft."

"What for?"

“Say! you’re kind of noseey, I think,” said Dig frankly. “What do you want to know for?”

But John Peep was looking at Chet and seemed to expect his answer to come from that individual.

“There’s been an accident at the shaft of my father’s mine,” Chet said. “There is a cave-in, and my father and five other men are shut down in the mine. We’re going to see if we can’t get into the Silent Sue mine from the old Crayton shaft. You know the Crayton shaft, John?”

“I know,” said the Indian boy, nodding. “You can’t get down there.”

“Why can’t we?” cried Dig explosively. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“You can’t get down there,” repeated the lame Indian, but stepping out of the way when Dig urged Poke along the trail.

“Why not?” asked Chet again.

“You can’t get down there,” said the Indian for a third time, and then he turned and hobbled back toward the shack.

“You can’t get any sense out of *him*,” grumbled Dig, in disgust. “He’s got some bug in his head. Maybe he thinks this whole mountain belongs to him because it used to belong to his tribe. Old

Scarface told me this mountain was 'bad medicine' and nobody used to come here but the Indian medicine men in the old days. You couldn't hire Scarface to come up here."

The two white boys were riding steadily on over the rough trail. Chet kept looking back at the abandoned camp, for he was puzzled. He wondered what John Peep could have meant.

"There!" he exclaimed suddenly. "See that?"

"See what?" demanded his chum, twisting his neck in order to look behind him.

"There's a man with that fellow — a white man."

"With the lame Indian?" queried Digby.

"Why, so there is! Funny! Can't be one of the boys following us?"

"Of course not. Nobody could follow us so fast on foot. There! They are staring after us. I never saw that man before; did you?"

"I don't remember. He's not a miner — or, he isn't in working togs. Give it up, Chet."

So did Chet. He had something much more important to think of. While the men at the shaft of the Silent Sue were endeavouring to hoist out the rubbish that had fallen into the bottom of the shaft, the young chap believed there was a better chance

to get into the lower tunnel of the mine by following the old drift of the abandoned diggings.

In half an hour the two lads reached the mouth of the Crayton shaft. Neither of the boys had been this way for a year.

Something had happened since their last visit to the spot. The old log windlass was overturned, and when they left their horses and ran to the mouth of the shaft they saw that a part of the shoring had given way and hundreds of tons of earth and rock had fallen into the pit, completely choking the way to the old mine.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROCKING STONE

“Oh, Chet!” gasped Digby Fordham. “This is awful! Isn’t there any other old mine that touches the Silent Sue’s tunnels?”

“Not that I ever heard of,” replied his chum seriously. “*This* was only a chance, of course; but father spoke of this old mine so recently —”

Chet was staring about the opening in the forest. Like the place at which they had seen the lame Indian boy, it was an abandoned camp. Several other claims had been worked here; but the shafts of the other mines had caved in years and years before.

There was something peculiar about the filling-in of the Crayton shaft. Chet began to scrutinise the vicinity — as Dig said, “sniffing around like a hound on a cold scent.”

“No, sir!” muttered Chet. “It is not a cold scent.”

“Heh?” growled Digby.

“There’s been somebody here lately.”

“Well?”

“Here’s a campfire — fresh ashes. It rained three days ago. These ashes are perfectly dry and feathery. Never have been rained on.”

“Quite true! Good for ‘Trailer Joe, the Young Scout of the Rockies,’ ” chuckled Dig.

“That’s all right. You can laugh,” said his chum. “But I haven’t forgotten the things old Rafe has told us when we have been out hunting. It’s well to remember such things.”

“But what’s the good now?” demanded Dig. “We can’t get into the mine, and it doesn’t matter who was here before us. Unless you think there’s somebody gone down this shaft and the cave-in’s shut them down there,” he added quickly.

“I don’t believe that’s happened,” said Chet thoughtfully. He was walking around and around the mouth of the old shaft. He stopped and picked up the end of a tough, straight sapling.

“Why the lever, I wonder?” Chet continued. “It’s been used to pry something — The old windlass, of course. That windlass was knocked over purposely.”

“What for?” cried Dig.

“I bet the cave-in was started with this lever,

too. They pried out some of the heavy timbering. This old shaft was shored-up with oak and was a good job. You know that, Dig."

"But I don't know what you're getting at," answered Digby.

"I'm getting at just this: The mouth of this old mine was closed on purpose, and very recently."

"Oh!"

"Somebody must have had a reason for doing this, though I don't see what. And father was interested in the Crayton claim. I know that. He spoke of having got control of it at a low price."

"Petered out before you and I were born, Chet," cried Digby Fordham, with impatience.

"Perhaps. But father had a reason for getting hold of it. Perhaps he thought the pay-streak of our mine was leading this way."

"Then he wouldn't have caved in this shaft," Dig said slowly.

"No, no! Somebody else did it. I — don't — see —"

"Whew!" ejaculated his chum, suddenly. "By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland! I know who did it, *sure!*"

36 The Trail Boys of the Plains

"Who?" queried the other boy wonderingly.

"Who told us we couldn't get into this shaft? Why, that lame Indian!"

"John Peep?" muttered Chet.

"Yes! Don't you remember?"

"Of course he must have known the shaft was filled up," agreed Chet Havens. "But do you suppose he had anything to do with it? Why should he cave in the pit?"

"Dunno," grumbled Dig. "But it looks funny. You don't suppose one cave-in had anything to do with the other, do you?"

"Of course not!" exclaimed Chet. "Only, the Indian boy knew of this. He may have been over here recently. You can see that the marks on this sapling are fresh. Well, this isn't going to help us any," he added hopelessly. "We might as well go back. Oh dear, Dig! how will they get father and the boys out of tunnel Number Two?"

"They're working hard, Chet," his chum said, trying to speak hopefully. "We'd better go back, I expect."

"Let's breathe the horses a little," proposed his friend. "There's no particular hurry, goodness knows! I hate to go back to Silver Run and tell

mother just how the matter stands. It's a terrible thing, Dig."

"I know," muttered his chum, and walked away, unable to talk about Mr. Havens' peril in the caved-in mine.

Dig walked to the brow of a sharp slope. The opening into the Crayton mine was on a small plateau, one side of which gave right up on the steep slope of the mountain. Landslides in the past had raked this side of the mountain quite bare. Here and there a ledge cropped out, or a boulder, in rolling down the slope, had found lodgment; the trees that had taken root in the thin soil were stunted and the bushes meagre.

Digby rested a booted foot upon a boulder that hung poised upon the very edge of the plateau. He leaned forward to look down the hill, and as he did so he felt the huge stone tip forward.

"Whew!" he ejaculated, leaping back, expecting to see the boulder slide over the precipice.

"What's the matter, Dig?" demanded Chet, turning to look at him.

"Look there!" and the other pointed to the boulder, which, instead of slipping over the edge, rocked back into its bed, and dipped again and

38 The Trail Boys of the Plains

again while it gradually settled into its usual position.

“A rocking stone,” said Chet with a smile, seeing that his chum was greatly excited. “What about it?”

“Whew!” and Dig expelled his breath as he frequently did to express emotion. “I thought I was a goner. The old rock pitched forward as if it were going to dive right down the side of the mountain.”

“If it ever does get the right push,” said Chet, looking down the slope, “it will start something. It’s a big one — and if it hits that gully yonder,” pointing to a groove in the mountainside below, that marked the course of some ancient avalanche or watercourse, “it will tear straight down to the foot of the mountain — and that’s ten miles, Dig, if it’s an inch.”

“Uh-huh!” admitted his chum. “Be some ruction. I’d like to see it.”

He rested his weight on the rocking stone again and tried to throw it forward; but its balance seemed perfect. Just the same, when they mounted their horses and took the back track for the Silent Sue, the rocking stone still was balancing to and fro as

though about to plunge over the brink of the plateau.

From the level of the caved-in shaft the boys descended a slanting path just within the border of the forest. Through openings in the trees on the right hand they occasionally caught a view of the avalanche-swept space which they had seen a few moments before from the higher level.

Chet's thought was naturally upon the trouble at the Silent Sue and his father's fate; so it was Dig, usually the less observant, who stopped his mustang suddenly and put out a warning hand to his chum.

"Hey! look there!" said Dig.

Chet glanced out upon the barren mountainside. A figure was just coming into sight, walking up the gully. The sides of this gulch were so steep that the boys could see right down into it.

"Lame John!" exclaimed Dig. "Now, what d'you suppose he's followed us over here for?"

"Maybe he didn't follow us," Chet said slowly. "I reckon this side of the mountain is free, too."

"See him sneaking up?" growled Dig. "Of course he's following us. He told us that old shaft was caved in —"

"No. He only told us we couldn't get down into the mine by that shaft."

"Well, he's followed us over to see what we are going to do about it — My glo-ree! Look at that!"

There was reason for Digby Fordham's cry. With a smash and a rumble, the rocking stone pitched over the brink of the hill. Whatever had held it in its bed had broken away without warning and the huge rock commenced to descend the slope at a speed that momentarily increased.

It was headed directly for the gully in which the lame Indian youth was walking. So steep were the sides of the gully, and so swiftly was the rock descending the hill, that it seemed impossible for the endangered Indian to escape.

On the heels of Dig's cry, however, Chet Havens spurred his horse out into the open ground. He unslung the lariat from his saddle-bow as Hero galloped to the edge of the gully.

Chet arrived there just as John Peep looked up and saw the thundering slab plunging down upon him. He might possibly escape it; then again he might be caught by it. The avalanche descending with the huge rock was of considerable compass,

and even should the Indian youth try to scale the side of the gully, he might be swept away by some broken tree or the like.

For the boulder was sweeping all before it. Dust rose in a cloud, and through that cloud, limbs of trees, brush, smaller stones, and other debris could be seen whirling.

Chet paid little attention to it, however, as he was above the gully and was out of the course of the slide. But he doubted if the Indian lad could easily escape, and he sent the coils of his lariat whirling down into the hollow.

"Catch hold and I'll haul you up!" yelled the white boy.

The Indian could not possibly have heard him. By this time the roar of the landslide drowned all other sounds. The red youth, however, understood.

He had already started to scramble up the high wall of the gully; but the climb was steep and difficult. He seized upon the rope and Chet Havens leaped down from his saddle.

Chet was a strong boy, despite his slender figure. He pulled in the rope, hand over hand, and swung the Indian youth, kicking now and then at

42 The Trail Boys of the Plains

the rocks, above and clear of the descending avalanche.

Dig spurred his horse over to the place and leaped down to give his chum a helping hand.

"By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland!" he ejaculated. "That redskin sure had a close shave, Chet! What d'you know about it, old man? Whew!"

Chet gave his hand to John Peep and helped him up to their level. The Indian youth was breathless; but his countenance displayed no fear. He gazed down the gulch after the roaring landslide, and shook his head.

"Much danger in that," he grunted.

"You bet your life!" exclaimed the slangy Digby. "You were never nearer the Happy Hunting Grounds in your life."

John Peep turned sharply on Digby. "You think it is funny to talk that way to me because I am an Indian," he said. "I do not believe in any Happy Hunting Grounds any more than you white boys believe you go to a Big Candy-Shop when you die. That is silly."

"Oh! Ugh!" gasped Dig, surprised. "All right. Needn't get mad over it, old man."



Dig spurred his horse over to the place and leaped down to give his chum a helping hand

With a gravity that seemed quite beyond his years, John Peep turned to Chet. He had not changed colour in the least, nor was he disturbed by his perilous adventure in any way.

There were not many Indians about Silver Run; and those who were there were, as a rule, miserable creatures. Even this youth's own family were hopeless, lazy and dirty in the extreme, prone to the use of "white man's firewater" when they could get it.

But John Peep was more like what an Indian should be — or so Chet Havens thought. He was odd; but the white boy liked him, and when John put out his hand Chet accepted it and shook it warmly.

"You saved me. I will not forget. Thanks!" said the Indian lad.

"Don't say anything more about it," Chet said quickly. "You'd have done as much for me."

John Peep looked at him curiously for a moment. Digby, getting impatient, blurted out:

"Well! are we going to stay here all day? We might as well get back to the Silent Sue."

"You knew the shaft up there was caved in," Chet said to the Indian. "How did it happen? I

44 The Trail Boys of the Plains

wanted dreadfully to go down. I believe we could reach my father and the other men entombed in the Silent Sue through the old tunnel from the Crayton shaft."

"Can't they be dug out through your shaft?" asked the Indian.

"I'm afraid it will take a week," said Chet huskily.

"Oh, come on, Chet!" exclaimed Dig sympathetically. "Maybe some other way will turn up."

"White boy know any other way?" queried John Peep quickly.

"No; of course he doesn't," cried Chet. "We're at our wits' end. There is an awful mass of stuff fallen into the Silent Sue shaft. As much as has fallen into this old shaft up yonder," and he pointed up the hill.

The Indian lad seemed to hesitate; but finally he turned and spoke directly to Chet again.

"You come. Tie horses there," pointing to the woods. "I show you something. Be quick."

He started off abruptly, going toward the forest. Of course, he could not travel very fast because of his lameness. Chet and Dig looked at each other in both surprise and doubt.

“What does he mean, d’you s’pose?” whispered Dig.

“I don’t know. But it won’t hurt to humour him,” returned his chum.

To tell the truth, Chet Havens felt hope suddenly aflame in his heart; yet why, he could not tell.

CHAPTER V

THE BEARS' DEN

THE lame Indian youth did not even look behind to see if he was followed. Digby Fordham was finally as much impressed as his chum. He jerked Hero's reins out of Chet's hand and led both mustangs into the shelter of the wood, where he tied them.

Chet coiled the lariat up slowly; nor had he followed John Peep far when Dig rejoined him.

"Lucky I had this rope hung on the saddle-bow, wasn't it?" Chet observed.

"Going to take it with you?" queried his friend.

"Yes. It might come in handy again."

"Huh!" returned Dig. "I'd rather have a gun along."

"What under the sun do you want a gun for?" asked Chet.

"Well! you never know when you're going to want a gun — up here in the mountain, anyway."

"Nonsense! You see that fellow isn't armed," pointing to the Indian.

"That's his business," said Dig doubtfully. "You never know when you're going to run into a mountain lion —"

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Chet Havens. "We're not looking for game."

"And that's just when we run into something, sure-pop!"

Chet did not answer this. They were following hard on John Peep's heels, who did not once look back to see if they were coming. He was leading them up the path which went to the abandoned mine where the shaft had been caved in by some miscreant.

At the level of the plateau on which the shaft was dug, the Indian lad struck off to the right, away from the Crayton shaft and toward the side of the mountain from which the white boys had ridden. There was good reason for John Peep's having advised the tethering of the horses. This part of the forest was a dense jungle, never having been cleared.

The trees were huge fellows, some of them scarred and riven by lightning-bolts. Man's hand, since the beginning, had marked this forest but slightly.

The ground was rocky, ledges and big boulders cropping out between the trees. It was really a mystery how the trees took root and held their footing between the rocks.

The Indian kept on up the hill, slanting ever to the right, away from the plateau. Suddenly Chet discovered that they were in a well-defined path; but it was not a man-made track — it was not even an Indian runway.

It twisted and turned between the rocks and big trees, first going up, and then down, the hill. Chet turned to smile grimly at his friend.

“Maybe you’ll wish you did have your gun, Dig,” he said.

“Huh?”

“A bear made this path originally, I bet! And many of his relatives have followed in the same track. This path leads right to an old den, or I’m much mistaken.”

“By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland!” ejaculated Digby Fordham. “I’m not going to stick my head into a bear’s lair. Friendship is all right, and fly-paper is no stickier than I am when it comes to being chums with a fellow; but don’t you think this is asking a deal too much?”

and Dig looked up at his chum with a very queer look on his face.

"Hush up and come on!" exclaimed Chet. "If John Peep isn't scared, we can't afford to be."

"Why not?" demanded Dig.

"Because, in all likelihood, he thinks we are a couple of cowards —"

"Whew! After what you did for him?"

"Pshaw!" said Chet. "I helped him out of trouble; yes. But I didn't get into a particle of danger myself — you know that."

"I don't see why that Indian should have a poor opinion of us," growled Digby.

"Well, he has that air. He's different from us," said Chet, puzzled himself to explain just what he meant. "But, you see, he acts like a grown man, while we're only a couple of kids."

"Whew!" ejaculated Dig again, and with an air of doubting his chum's statement.

All this had been said in too low a tone to reach the ears of John Peep, who was some distance ahead of the white boys. Now Chet quickened his steps, and Dig came on, a little reluctantly.

The trio was approaching a mass of piled rock which was a landmark from the valley ten or twelve

miles below. It was some distance above the level of the plateau on which was the Crayton shaft opening.

The beaten path was unmistakably an animal trail; but John Peep went right ahead, entirely unafraid. Secretly, Chet thought the path could not have been lately used by any of the species.

And young Havens had something of much greater importance in his mind, too. He was vastly puzzled by John Peep's behaviour. It seemed as though the young Indian must believe he could help them get at the miners entombed in the Silent Sue mine. Yet they were several miles from the claim of Chet's father.

The Indian boy's seriousness had impressed Chet, however; the latter believed John to be quite incapable of playing them any trick, when he had himself been so recently saved from the landslide.

Gratitude, if not humanity, would surely inspire John Peep. He knew the two white boys were much exercised over the situation of the men buried in the Silent Sue mine. He could not be cruel enough to play any trick upon them!

They rounded a big boulder at the foot of the piled rocks, and there beheld the dark mouth of the

bears' den, low down on the ground. One had to get upon hands and knees to get into it.

"Whew!" exploded Digby again. "Mebbe there aren't any bears around, Chet; but I declare this is just the place for a lion. Remember that old scalawag we helped Rafe Peters to kill that time in Macomber's wood-lot? Just such a place as this he had to hide in."

"There's no smell of a lion about," declared Chet, yet with some anxiety.

"By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland!" cried Dig. "I don't trust to my nose when I'm around where mountain lions may be — no, sir!"

John Peep, who had said nothing, looked at Digby, however, with open scorn.

"White boy maybe scared, huh?" he grunted. "This old den."

"That's all right, that's all right," Dig returned airily. "But some stray creature might have gone in there since you were here last. And what are we going in for, anyway?"

"You stay here. Havens come," said John Peep, with deep disgust, and at once dropped to his knees.

But Digby wouldn't hear of being separated from his chum. "You bet I'm going in there if Chet does, John! You can put that in your pipe-of-peace and smoke it! If there's anything going to chew Chet up, his second mouthful will be little old me — and I bet I don't set well on his stomach, either! Lead on!"

"Umph!" was John Peep's only comment.

"I don't know what you fellows are aiming at," growled Dig, getting down on all fours to follow Chet, "but I'm in on it, whatever it is."

Chet looked over his shoulder to admonish his chum.

"Don't anger him. I believe he can help us. I wish we'd brought that pick and shovel we carted up here on our horses."

"What for?" cried Digby.

"I believe we may have use for them."

"Well, I suppose we could make some kind of a showing in fighting a mountain lion if we had a pick and shovel. But they'd come in better to bury him with after we'd killed him," commented his chum.

The Indian lad went ahead and the chums scrambled after him into the bears' den. The passage — the sides of which they could easily touch with their

outstretched hands — was as black as the inside of a coal-chute; and it inclined sharply like a chute, too.

The passage seemed to be straight, and the chums heard nothing but an occasional grunt from John Peep, who had difficulty in crawling with his crippled leg.

Chet scrambled along after the Indian, and Digby Fordham, to be sure of his chum's position, grabbed him by the ankle.

"Stop pulling my leg, Dig!" cried Chet, his voice sounding muffled and strange in the subterranean passage.

"I've got to grab you once in a while to make sure you're here," said Dig. "It's as dark in here as the pants' pocket of a negro, stealing chickens in the dark of the moon!"

"Stop your joking, and come on," commanded Chet.

"Oh! you can't lose me, boy," returned his chum. "At least, you won't lose me in this hole. I'm keeping right after you. There! Tag! you're it again."

John Peep grunted — whether in disgust at Dig's nonsense or not — and stopped. The white boys were right behind him. They waited, asking no

question, and soon heard the Indian boy scratch a match.

At the second scrape of the match the light flashed up. They saw him light a candle in a rude tin lantern. It was plain it had been made by punching holes in the sides of a half gallon bean can. But crude as the lantern was, its glow dissipated the darkness.

"Whew!" came from Digby. "What do you know about this hole, Chet? Look out! If you ever slip over the edge of it you'll be a long time getting back to the top."

But Chet gave him slight attention. He was peering into the shaft that here opened in the floor of the cavern. The lantern light showed that the walls of the shaft were rough; indeed, there were natural steps in it.

But a new rope had been fastened to a heavy beam laid across the mouth of the pit; and there were knots every two feet or so in the rope, to aid one in descending and ascending the shaft.

Chet turned eagerly to ask the Indian lad:

"Does it lead into the tunnel from the Crayton shaft?"

"Yes," John Peep replied, simply.

"Say! no miner ever dug this!" cried Digby Fordham.

"Of course not! It's an old watercourse. That's plain enough. Long before it was a bears' den the water bored this passage in the rock, found this shaft, and through it reached some subterranean stream."

"Whew!" whistled Dig. "And who put the rope here? Not this Indian, I bet a cookie."

"White boys ask no questions, I tell no lies," said John Peep succinctly.

"Well! we've got no business to ask questions," declared Chet quickly, before his chum could say anything to anger John Peep. "We're sure obliged to you for showing us this place."

"Come on, Dig. I bet this leads down to the very tunnel from the Crayton shaft that father spoke about. Oh, my! if it enables us to get into the Silent Sue and get father and the boys out —"

"All right. Lead ahead," interrupted Dig. "I'm game if you are."

CHAPTER VI

IN THE OLD TUNNEL

THE lame Indian youth had no idea of giving up the leadership of the expedition. He grunted, and pushed Chet's hand away when the white boy reached to take the rudely-made lantern by its bail.

"Me go first," he said with confidence, and immediately swung himself over the edge of the rock.

In spite of his crippled leg, John Peep went down the rough rocks quickly, clinging with one hand to the knotted rope, the bail of the lantern swung over his other arm.

"He must have been often down this shaft," thought Chet to himself; but said nothing to Dig Fordham. He only wondered why the Indian had often descended this shaft into the heart of the mountain.

John Peep raised his face and spoke from the depths:

"Havens follow —'bout ten yards; then other white boy come ten yards further back. Rope plenty strong."

"All right!" responded Chet cheerily. "We're after you."

"Whew!" whistled Digby. "If that rope should break we'd be after him with a vengeance!"

The descent of the shaft was no easy matter, as the two chums from Silver Run quickly learned. Three bearing their weight upon it made the rope jerk and wriggle like an excited snake. Both Chet and Dig were several times almost thrown from their footing on the rough rock.

"You're rocking the boat, Chet; look out!" grumbled Dig. "I expect to make a dive over your head any moment. Ugh! that's wriggly!"

"Hang on, old man!" called back Chet. "That's the best I can tell you."

The walls of the shaft, however, did make a natural stairway; and at a pinch one might have climbed down and up again without recourse to the knotted rope. However, the rope enabled the boys to swing from side to side of the shaft, as the footing seemed better.

John Peep's lantern cast sufficient light upward for the chums to see where they stepped. Indeed, all the light from the candle flickered on the walls

above the descending Indian; the bottom of the pit was in utter darkness.

It was a slow descent, as was natural, and the shaft was very deep. As they had climbed so much higher than the plateau where the Crayton shaft was sunk, naturally this pit must be much deeper if it reached the old tunnel in which the Crayton gold vein had petered out in the old gold-mining days.

It was gruesome, too. Even Dig Fordham seemed to have lost his voice at the top of the shaft. An occasional grunt from John Peep was all the vocal sound that was made by the three for some time.

The white boys' leather-shod feet scraping the rocks was the principal sound, for the Indian's tread in his moccasins was silent.

This continued until finally Dig could restrain himself no longer.

"By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland! How long's this going to keep up? Is that Indian going to keep climbing down this hole forever?"

"Hush, Dig!" commanded Chet.

"I did not make the place," said John Peep, with

scorn. "White boy scared — he'd better have stayed out. Havens come. He not scared."

"I'm not scared!" yelled Dig, his voice booming in the shaft. "By the last hoptoad —"

"And that's silly," interrupted John Peep quickly. "There is a legend to the effect that St. Patrick drove all the reptilian species out of Ireland; but it is doubtful if the eviction included the so-called common, or garden, toad."

"Whew!" gasped Dig. "Did you hear that, Chet?"

His chum was chuckling and did not answer. Dig tried to treat John Peep as though he were an uneducated "blanket Indian," as the uncultivated redmen were called. But John Peep had been some years at school and was notably the brightest scholar in his class.

Why he had taken to the woods and preferred to live in the wilderness, now that vacation had begun, Chet could only surmise.

It was just then that the Indian reached the bottom of the shaft. Or, rather, he reached the place where a hole was broken through the wall into the tunnel from the Crayton shaft.

60 The Trail Boys of the Plains

Here a circular cavern had been hollowed out in past ages by the falling water; the subterranean stream finding an outlet at one side, where another pit dropped away into the heart of the mountain to an unknown depth.

The circular cavern was a most beautiful place, crystal stalactites hanging from its arched roof, while pointed stalagmites were strewn over the floor.

It had been, however, many, many years since there had been a particle of moisture in this cavern. There was a good current of air, and it was dry.

All this the white boys discovered when they reached the end of the rope and stood beside the Indian. Chet turned almost immediately to the cavity into the mining tunnel. It had been recently dug, without a doubt, for there were bright scales of quartz rock lying about and a pile of freshly excavated earth.

"Whew!" muttered Dig in Chet's ear. "I'd really like to know who did this, wouldn't you?"

"It wasn't my father, I'll be bound," responded Chet, in the same tone. "There must be somebody interested in the old Crayton diggings besides him. Hush!"

John Peep came back to them. He brought a pick

and shovel from some hiding place in the darker end of the cavern. To all appearances they were new implements.

"White boys want to dig into other mine," he said briefly. "You come. I show."

"Heap good," grunted Dig, with a grin.

But the Indian paid him no attention, merely handing him the shovel, while he gave the pickaxe to Chet. Then he stooped to crawl into the newly-excavated passage.

Dig looked at Chet and scratched his head.

"What gets my goat," he muttered, "is how that redskin talks one minute like a college professor and the next like Poor Lo with his face painted and a dirty blanket trailing at his heels. What do you think of him, anyway?"

"I think he has saved the lives of father and the men with him," replied Chet earnestly. "Come on, Dig! We're going to get them out."

Only a thin shell of earth and rock separated the bottom of the shaft down which the trio had come from the old mining tunnel. Whoever had burst the wall through must have known just where the tunnel lay and must have been aware of its nearness to the ancient watercourse.

The loose earth was dropping in this short passage; but the drift from the Crayton shaft was well timbered with hewn oak. A single wide plank had been knocked out of the shoring to make an entrance into the tunnel.

Down here in the heart of the mountain the planking had neither rotted nor become dry and punky. The timbers all seemed just as good as when the miners had put them in.

"Come on, Dig!" repeated Chet, hurrying along the tunnel. "We can't get them out any too quickly."

"Where are you going to dig?" queried his chum.

"Right at the end, of course. Father said he thought the Number Two tunnel of the Silent Sue passed by the end of this drift."

John Peep said nothing, but held the lantern and let Chet and Dig take the lead. They came to the end of the old passage after walking some distance. Here some recent excavating had undoubtedly been done. There was no rubbish in the way and they could attack at once the end wall.

The roof of the tunnel was a great slab of rock. The old method of "timbering in square sets" had

been used in the Crayton claim, and the square cribs, filled with waste rock, upheld the roof of these workings.

What puzzled Chet was the identity of the person who had been so recently working at the end of this abandoned tunnel.

“What was he working here for?” demanded Dig. “There’s no sign of silver that I can see.”

Both boys thought that they knew a good deal about pay ore, both gold and silver. They were so much about their fathers’ mine, and had heard so much miners’ talk, and had seen so many specimens of ore, that they felt they were not to be easily fooled.

John Peep had nothing to say and the expression on his face did not invite questions.

Chet and Digby threw off their coats and set to work. Chet first swung the pick, while Dig shovelled the earth away. In five minutes Chet’s pick rang on a rock in the wall.

“Hello!” exclaimed his chum. “Did you hear that?”

“I hit a rock.”

“And somebody hallooed,” declared his chum, with confidence.

64 The Trail Boys of the Plains

“Was it a voice? Do you think so?” cried the excited Chet. “So soon?”

“I bet you!” was the answer.

Chet attacked the wall with renewed courage. The earth and small stones rattled down faster than Dig could shovel the rubbish aside.

“Hold on! hold on!” gasped Dig. “Let’s take a breath. You’ll bury us both in this stuff, Chet. Wait till I shout again.”

“Go ahead!” panted his chum, quite breathless.

Digby raised his voice as loudly as possible. Immediately there was an answer — unmistakably a human voice!

“They’re in there — and they are alive!” cried Chet, half sobbing. “Come on, Dig! maybe some of them are hurt! I want to hear my father’s voice!”

CHAPTER VII

THE RESCUE — AND AFTERWARD

THE two boys went at the task of digging into the other mine with renewed vigour. A murmur of sound came through the intervening wall of earth — unmistakably the voices of the entombed miners.

“Hurrah!” cheered Digby Fordham. “They hear us!”

Chet’s heart was too full for him to speak. He worked at the wall of dirt and small stones furiously, and without regard to the bringing down of a possible avalanche upon his own and Digby’s heads.

John Peep stood back and held the lantern so that they could see. He did not say a word after the chums began this second attack upon the wall.

Again the muffled shouts were heard. The chums replied — screaming at the very tops of their voices. A mass of earth fell inward.

“They are digging too! Keep it up, Chet,” called out his chum.

“I’m — getting — wind — ed!” gasped Chet.

66 The Trail Boys of the Plains

“Let me take hold there!” cried the sturdy Dig. “You take the shovel.”

They exchanged implements, and the furious excavating went on for several minutes. They were making a round hole about breast high in the wall of the tunnel. The noise of their own pick and shovel drowned other sounds. Suddenly the pick-axe in Dig's hands clashed with another iron implement wielded by somebody on the other side of the wall!

“Hurrah!” cried Dig Fordham. “We've found 'em, Chet!”

Another mass of earth fell in and the boys saw a light twinkling ahead of them.

“Is that you, Father?” called Chet Havens.

“Is that you, my boy? Well, well!” exclaimed the jolly voice of Mr. Havens, and it was filled with pride. “It didn't take you two boys long to find us, did it?”

“And John Peep, the Cheyenne,” returned Chet. “He did more than we.”

But when he turned to look at the Indian youth, he was not there. With his lantern he had stolen away the moment he saw through the broken wall that the entombed miners had lamps.

“We have been trying to hit that old tunnel you are in, boys, for hours,” pursued Mr. Havens, as the men broke down the barrier between the two mines, and swiftly cleared the earth and rock away. “We knew we could escape through the Crayton shaft if once we could hit the old drift.”

“But you couldn’t, Father!” exclaimed Chet eagerly.

“Why not, Son?” demanded the gentleman, who still remained back in the darkness while his men worked.

“Because the shaft is caved in.”

“What’s that?” queried Mr. Havens quickly, and with some anxiety in his tone. “It was all right a week ago, for I saw it.”

“Somebody has pried out some of the timbering and caused a cave-in. It’s as bad as the one in our shaft, Father.”

“Well! I declare!”

“Say! I bet that lame Indian knows who did it,” growled Dig, resting on his pick. “But he won’t tell.”

“Then how, for mercy’s sake, did you get down here, will you tell me?” cried Mr. Havens, much astonished.

“Through an old bears’ den that John Peep showed us.”

“John Peep? That young Indian lad that went to school with you, Chetwood, and was so clever at his books?”

“Yes, sir. He was with us until just a minute or two ago. Now he’s gone away — so as not to be thanked, I suppose. He’s a good fellow,” declared Chet confidently.

“He surely is a good fellow if he showed you how to get down here to our rescue,” agreed Mr. Havens. “But I must look into this strange cave-in of the Crayton shaft. It’s a most mysterious thing. People don’t go around closing old mines for nothing; unless it’s mischievous boys.”

“’Twasn’t me!” denied Dig emphatically.

“You’re not the only mischievous young scamp there is in Silver Run,” chuckled Mr. Havens. “Well, boys — how is it? Can we crawl through?”

“You come along and try it, Boss. Easy on that foot, now!” said one of the miners solicitously.

“Oh, Father! are you hurt?” cried Chet, in sudden anxiety.

“Not so much but I shall get over it,” replied Mr. Havens, hobbling through the aperture between the

two mines. "Now, Jackson, you're in charge of the work on this drift. Just as soon as you can get to it from our end, build a bulkhead of heavy timbering across this hole. We don't want any connection between the two mines."

"All right, sir," agreed the man spoken to, and who followed Mr. Havens first into the old Crayton mine.

"Oh, Father!" exclaimed Chet again, seeing that Mr. Havens' right foot was bandaged, and that his boot had been cut away; "are you sure you are not badly hurt?"

"There may be a small bone or two broken," his father said; "but that's all. I reckon I'll be on a crutch for a while. I won't be able to ride at all for some weeks. And that is going to be unhandy," he added, "for I've got an errand at Grub Stake — and a mighty important errand, too."

Chet made no comment upon this last statement, for he knew his father had spoken to himself rather than to anybody else. It appeared that Mr. Havens had been hurt at the time of the blast.

"And it was that Tony Traddles' fault," declared one of the men. "He just naturally lied about that timbering being all right. She shook right down

when the shot went off, and the boss got the end of a beam on his foot."

"Tony'd ought to be thrashed!" exclaimed another of the miners.

"He'll lose his job, and that right suddenly," declared Mr. Havens. "I won't trust a man like him around the Silent Sue."

The miners had several lamps and it was easy now to find the small hole into the circular cavern at the bottom of the shaft. Here the light sparkled beautifully upon the pendants from the cavern roof, and showed as well the knotted rope hanging from the beam laid across the mouth of the shaft.

"Looks as if it was going to be a tug getting you up that hole, Boss," said Jackson. "We'd better go up first and then raise you in a sling."

"I've got a good rope for that," cried Chet. "You'll find it right at the top of that shaft — unless it's been removed since Dig and I came down."

"We'll rig up something to help him, never fear," declared Jackson, who was the first to climb the shaft with the aid of the knotted rope. He carried a miner's lamp with him, and the boys and Mr. Havens sat down and watched the spark of the lamp as it wavered back and forth up the shaft.

The other four men started in succession after the mine boss. Mr. Havens questioned the boys regarding their adventures since the accident at the Silent Sue shaft. He was much interested in the condition of the Crayton shaft, and in the Indian boy's knowledge of this new entrance into the old gold diggings.

"Beats me!" was his puzzled comment. Then he continued:

"I want to get to Grub Stake in a hurry, and here I am laid up with a lame leg. It's important for me to see old John Morrisy, who was one of the original owners of this Crayton mine. He has agreed to sell me his share, and I need it to get control of the mine. Why I want control is a secret.

"Now, it looks to me," pursued Mr. Havens thoughtfully, "as though somebody else was anxious to get the Crayton mine—or to stop me from getting it. I don't know which.

"I don't care so much about the old shaft's being closed. Maybe that is a good thing, all things considered. But I must get the deeds to John Morrisy and have him put his mark on them before a Justice of the Peace. This lame foot is going to trouble me a whole lot—

"Hi! there's Jackson hallooing. Ay, ay! we hear you," answered Mr. Havens, and scrambled to his feet again.

A noose was let down from a ledge some distance up the shaft, and into this Mr. Havens placed his uninjured foot. The men above raised him to the shelf, and then they climbed up to another wide footing and swung Mr. Havens up to their level, this being repeated until he was finally raised to the top of the shaft.

Behind him Chet and Dig climbed, and they were all finally in the bears' den. They found no sign of John Peep either in the den or after they came out upon the mountainside.

"It certainly is good to be out of that mine, boys!" declared Mr. Havens. "We'll surprise old Rafe and Mr. Fordham, I surmise, when we arrive at the Silent Sue."

"We'll surprise Tony Traddles," growled Jackson. "I'd like to get my paws on to him."

"You leave him to me," Mr. Havens advised him. "Now, Chet, you say you've a horse near. Maybe you can boost me on to him, and we'll go over to the Silent Sue. Let me lean on your shoulder, boy."

Chet did as he was told, and as he walked beside

his father down the mountainside he added some details about John Peep and the mystery of the caved-in Crayton shaft. He also told Mr. Havens of seeing the strange white man with the Indian youth as he and Dig rode over from the Silent Sue.

“Who did he look like?” queried Mr. Havens.

“Nobody I ever saw around here before,” Chet replied.

“Well, it’s a puzzle,” muttered his father. “And somehow those papers have got to be carried to John Morrisy. The old man’s funny. Something might happen to him. I shan’t feel safe till our contract is fulfilled.”

Chet knew that his father was not speaking directly to him; so he remained silent. But he kept up a tremendous thinking. He wanted to get his chum off to one side and talk over a most wondrous idea that had come to him.

They found the two horses safely tethered where Dig had left them, and Mr. Havens was helped into the saddle of the bay horse without much difficulty. Hero was willing to walk if so commanded, therefore Chet’s father could ride without being badly shaken. His injured foot gave him great pain;

yet he insisted upon going around by his mine before descending the mountain to Silver Run.

The other men who had been shut in the mine tramped on ahead, and as the boys led their horses they did not catch up with the five miners on their way to the mine. Besides they were delayed.

As they approached the clearing in which John Peep had first appeared to Chet and Digby, the trio smelled smoke.

"Maybe we'll find the Indian here," suggested Dig. "Whew! I hope he has supper ready. I'm starved right now, if any one should ask you."

"That's more than a campfire!" exclaimed Chet suddenly. "Hear the flames crackling?"

"I hope the fellow hasn't set the woods afire. Indians are so careless," said Mr. Havens.

"Oh! I'm sure John isn't that kind of an Indian," said Chet.

They came in sight of the abandoned mining camp the next moment. The interior of the sheet-iron shack which the Indian youth had occupied was afire.

Smoke and yellow flames poured from the door of the shack. It was evident that the boy's outfit was being destroyed.

Dig tossed Poke's reins to Chet to hold and ran over to the burning structure. The sides of the shack were red-hot, and he could not get near to it; but with a long pole he managed to poke something out of the fire.

"Hi!" he yelled, trying to hold this object up by its bail. "Nobody home but the beans — and they're canned! Heap big Injun live on white man's grub just the same!"

"Stop, Dig!" commanded Chet. "Suppose John should hear you? And he did us a mighty big favour."

"Oh, he isn't around," declared Dig. "Think he'd let his outfit burn up like this?"

"Who did burn it?" asked Mr. Havens. "Looks odd to me. Of course the Indian boy wouldn't destroy his own property."

"I wonder where John went to when he left us so suddenly in that mine," Chet remarked.

"He flew the coop, and that's a fact!" said Dig. "But I couldn't guess where he went to. It's pretty safe to say he did not come this way."

"That's so," agreed Chet. "But I would like to see him; wouldn't you, Father?"

"Most certainly," said Mr. Havens. "Perhaps

we might do something to help the lad. If he has lost his outfit —”

“That white man!” exclaimed Chet, interrupting.

“Hel-lo!” said Mr. Havens.

“What white man?” asked Dig, in surprise.

“What are you dreaming about, Chet?”

“No dream,” said Chet, shaking his head. “But we saw a stranger talking with John Peep right here; you remember, Dig?”

“Sure. What of it?”

“Maybe he was the fellow who caved in the Crayton shaft. And maybe he didn’t want anybody to know about that old bears’ den entrance to the mine. See?”

“Just as clear as mud,” grunted Digby, shaking his head, while Mr. Havens chuckled.

“Maybe you think it’s far-fetched, Father,” Chet urged earnestly. “But perhaps because the Indian showed us the way to get you and the boys out, that white man came back here and burned his stuff.”

“That’s a good deal of villainy,” said his father, ruffling the boy’s hair with a kindly hand. “You’ve a great imagination, Chetwood.”

So Chet felt rather abashed and said nothing further about the mystery as they went on toward

the Silent Sue. He was convinced, however, that John Peep had got into trouble because of the help he had given them.

It was evident as they progressed that Mr. Havens was experiencing considerable pain from his bruised foot; yet he was troubled more because of his inability to get to Grub Stake than because of the injury itself. Chet wanted to say something right then; but he scarcely dared.

They came to the Silent Sue shaft at length. The five men running ahead had announced the joyful rescue, and the crowd that was gathered around the shaft welcomed Mr. Havens and the boys with loud cheers. A man started immediately for the town to inform Mrs. Havens of the rescue.

One man stood apart from the others. His face was ugly and morose of expression. He was a bewhiskered man. His beard had once been red, but was faded and tobacco stained.

His arms were so long that when he stood with his shoulders sagged a little, as they were habitually, his great, ham-like hands hung to his knees. His face and arms were tanned to the colour of old leather, the skin looking quite as tough.

Altogether, Tony Traddles was not a pleasant

person to look at. Now he was particularly offensive in appearance. He was alone while the crowd of miners and their wives were congratulating each other upon the escape of the entombed men from the mine.

Tony Traddles looked as though he would not have cared if Mr. Havens and the other five men had stayed down in the shaft forever.

CHAPTER VIII

CHET SHOOTS A HAWK

MR. FORDHAM had run forward to meet his partner and shake him by the hand.

"I'm mighty glad to see you, Jim!" he said, assisting Chet's father to the ground. "The boys say you've hurt your foot. Is it bad?"

"Bad enough," answered Mr. Havens, with much disgust, and standing like a stork on one leg until they brought him a stool to sit upon. "It's going to keep me from going over to Grub Stake, Fordham, as I had planned."

"Well, well! I'm glad you're out of that hole. That's enough to be joyful over. We'll worry about the other thing later. What about that scamp yonder?" and Mr. Fordham swung about to point at the ugly, gorilla-like man who stood at one side, sucking on the stem of an old pipe.

"Tony Traddles? Let him go — and let him go quick, Fordham," replied Mr. Havens earnestly, with a glance around at the rough men.

“I was tempted to have him jailed. A constable was up here,” said Mr. Fordham.

“No use. We couldn’t prove anything more than malicious mischief — and we’d have hard work to do that, I think. But it’s only by the mercy of Heaven that he hasn’t the lives of six men upon his conscience.”

“Ha!” snapped Dig’s father. “That fellow has no conscience.” Then he raised his voice: “Come here, you Tony!”

The ugly-looking man shuffled over to his employers. He looked sheepish as well as ugly, and still pulled furiously at his old pipe.

“Well, Tony, you played us a bad trick that time,” said Mr. Havens quietly. “You knew when I asked you if the timbering was secure that you had not wedged your cross-beams. Your neglect came near costing six lives. We cannot have you work on the Silent Sue any longer. Mr. Fordham will give you your time and money, and you can go.”

“I dunno what I done,” growled Tony, in a much injured tone. “I couldn’t help the shaft caving in.”

“You know it wouldn’t have caved if you had

done your work properly," said Mr. Fordham sharply.

"I could have forgiven you for that," Mr. Havens hastened to say. "But your falsehood led us to suppose that it was safe to fire the shot. That is your crime, Tony — the misstatement of fact."

"Aw, yer both down on me," growled Tony Traddles. "I might as well take my time and beat it."

"You might just as well, I think," said Dig's father grimly. "Here's your money. Count it. Sign here in the book. Now be off — for your own good; for let me tell you the men who worked with you don't feel very kindly toward you."

"Aw, let 'em blow! I ain't afraid of 'em," growled Tony Traddles.

The boys had been watching Tony and the mine owners, but from such a distance that they could not hear the conversation. They heard the men talking, however — the men who had been thrown out of work for several days because of Tony's carelessness.

Chet, after listening to several threats, looked about for Dig. The latter had gone to Rafe Peters'

shack for a sandwich. Young Fordham had already expressed himself as being "half starved." He was not used to going without his dinner.

"Hi, Dig!" shouted Chet, beckoning to his chum.

"Now, don't ask for the core," mumbled Dig, with his mouth full. "There ain't going to be no core. Ask Rafe for a hand-out yourself."

"Don't think everybody is as greedy as you are," said Chet. "Come on here. I believe there is going to be trouble."

He said the last in a low voice after his chum had reached his side.

"What d'you mean — trouble?" queried Dig.

"The men are dreadfully sore on Tony Trad-dles."

"And why shouldn't they be?" demanded Digby. "He'd ought to be tarred and feathered."

"Sh! Some of them might hear you."

"And I should worry about that!" cried Dig slangily.

"There's something going to happen to Tony, I do believe," whispered Chet. "You see, your father's paid him. Now he's going up the hill. And a bunch of the men hurried over behind that hill a few minutes ago."

"Whew!" exclaimed Dig. "Maybe — maybe they're going to lynch him!"

"Don't talk so foolishly!" cried Chet. "These miners aren't murderers, I should hope! Why — there's Bob Fane, and Jeffers, and Ike Pilsbury. Why, we know most all of them! They're decent men and wouldn't kill even Tony."

Dig chuckled. "Guess you think he deserves it, whatever they do to him?" he suggested.

"Come on! Father and your father are busy. I want to see if they do get Tony Traddles," Chet said eagerly, and set off for the grove of trees directly above the mouth of the mine that had been caved in because of Tony Traddles' negligence.

The men had melted away from about the shaft. Even Rafe Peters, the foreman, had disappeared. Mr. Havens and Mr. Fordham were busy at the corrugated iron shack that served as an office. The women and children had taken their recovered husbands and fathers home; it was only the younger and more irresponsible element of the Silent Sue workmen that had gone over the hill.

And in their tracks sped the two chums. Chet and Dig were both eager and curious. They saw the bewhiskered and long-armed Tony Traddles

staggering along the rough trail over the hill, occasionally turning to shake his hairy fist in the direction of the mine. He was probably muttering threats, too, against the mine and its owners.

The boys had taken a shorter path over the rise; besides, they were running. But the miners who had been associated with Tony had got over the hill first. They were hidden in the chaparral on the edge of the trail Tony was following, and when he came down the slope they sprang out and surrounded him.

Chet and Digby could not hear what was said at first; but Tony began to show fight almost at once. He was no coward.

The miners rushed in on him, tied his wrists together, and amid a great deal of noise and some laughter, hoisted him upon a fence-rail which four of them carried on their shoulders. His ankles were then triced together. His helplessness made him ridiculous.

"Oh, bully!" cried Dig, in delight. "That serves him right!"

"I wish they hadn't done it," said Chet. "They're going to ride him over the mountain."

"Sure they are! And they are going to warn

him not to come back," said Dig. "Serves him just right, I tell you."

"But suppose he does something to get square?" breathed Chet, much excited as well as anxious.

"Pooh! what could he do?" returned Dig. "He may as well go out and hunt for that big buffalo he was telling us about. I don't believe Tony Traddles would know a buffalo if he met one in his soup."

"What a ridiculous thing, Dig," said Chet. "And you needn't scorn the fact of the existence of the buffaloes. Rafe told us about them, too. And maybe we'll get a shot at them."

"How?" demanded Digby, fired by the thought.

But at that instant something happened to the miner who was being ridden on a rail, which attracted their attention again.

"Hi! see that somersault!" cried Dig.

"Oh, dear me!" Chet exclaimed. "That was enough to break his neck."

"And serve him just right!" quoth the savage Dig.

Tony Traddles, in struggling to free himself, and while raised on the shoulders of the men, had turned completely over and now hung head-down, his long

hair brushing the uneven ground over which he was being carried.

The rough men laughed and cheered; nor did they offer at first to help the discharged miner. Tony struggled and fought and finally was helped to a sitting posture again.

The boys were too far away to hear all the prisoner said — and that was fortunate. But now they ran forward and, above the cheers and laughter of the gang, heard Tony Traddles mouth out his threats:

“I’ll git square with you all! I’ll make ye all eat dirt fur this day’s work! Mark me, I’ll do fur ye all yet!”

The men hooted and laughed at him, and Tony’s rage grew.

“I’ll make ye all sing another tune. An’ I’ll git square with old Havens. Mark what I say now! I’ll git square.”

The rough men went on with their prisoner, tossing the rail up and down and making his seat as uncomfortable as possible. Chet stopped in the trail and halted Digby by clinging to his coat-sleeve.

“Let’s go back,” he said. “I wish the men

hadn't angered Tony so. Perhaps he *will* do my father some harm."

"A fat chance he'd have of doing that!" exclaimed the other boy. "He'll never dare come back here again. You tell your father. He'll be on the lookout for Tony."

"No, no! he's got enough to worry him. I wouldn't say anything now that would disturb his mind. And say, Dig, that reminds me! Let's try and get 'em to let us go to Grub Stake."

"Huh? To Grub Stake?" cried Digby, in surprise. "What for? Though I'd go quick enough if it were only to buy a lemon."

"There's a bigger reason than that," laughed Chet Havens. "Didn't you hear my father say something about getting some papers signed by a man named Morrisy who lives at Grub Stake?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, it's important. Father can't go because his foot's hurt. Let's tease to go. And on the trail we might run across that big buffalo."

"By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland!" ejaculated the excited Dig, falling back upon his favourite exclamation, "that would be great. But you do the askin', Chet. My father

will think I've got something up my sleeve if I undertake even to hint at such a trip."

Chet agreed to this; but it was not a propitious moment to broach the subject when the chums returned to the shaft of the Silent Sue. Mr. Havens had just been helped upon Chet's horse again, and was going home. He expected to remain at home for some weeks, and the business of the Silent Sue was to be under Mr. Fordham's sole direction.

The partners in the mine knew nothing about the trouble Tony Traddles had gotten into with the rougher element of the miners. Nor did the boys say anything about what they had seen.

The next morning Digby was over bright and early at the Havens house to see if Chet had spoken to his father regarding the Grub Stake trip. He found his chum in the lot beside the corral, where his mother had a flock of hens, with his small, twenty-two calibre rifle. It was the little weapon Chet had learned to shoot with.

"What are you doin' with that little play gun?" chuckled Digby. "Shootin' horseflies?"

"Just you keep still a minute," whispered Chet, who was crouching behind a shed wall. "Stoop down here. Keep still. I'm watching a hawk."

"You can't shoot even a chicken hawk with that thing!" exclaimed Dig, scorning a weapon of small calibre.

"You wait and see," commanded Chet. "There he comes now!"

Far off against the sky appeared a dark spot, circling ever lower and lower. The great hawk swept down in narrowing circles, its objective point plainly being Mrs. Havens' hen-run.

"Why don't you get a gun?" growled Dig, for although he well knew Chet's skill with firearms, he thought the tiny rifle a foolish thing.

Just then a voice behind the boys put in a word:

"I reckon your friend is going to wait for the hawk to drop on the chicken before he shoots. 'Twon't carry more'n ten feet, will it?"

Chet turned rather angrily. He did not mind his chum's joking; but this stranger's scornful remark angered him.

And he was a stranger. Chet thought he had never seen the man before. The fellow wore a big black sombrero, but was not in working clothes. His boots were polished, he wore a ruffled shirt and silk tie and cuffs.

His countenance was not pleasant, for his eyes

were too sharp and too near together. He had his brown moustache curled and there was an odour of strong perfume about him, as though he had just been to the barber's.

"You wait a couple of minutes," Chet Havens said sharply, "and you'll see how far this gun carries. Providing that hawk isn't frightened away," he added, glancing upward.

The stranger leaning on the fence immediately became very still. Dig began to grow nervous — for his friend's sake.

"Say! let me run in and get you a proper gun, Chet," he whispered. "I know you can kill that hawk up there; but not with that dinky little thing."

"The first hawk I ever killed I brought down with this rifle," muttered Chet. "And I bet I haven't forgotten the trick — That way!"

As the hawk suddenly swooped, Chet stepped clear of the shed. He didn't even bring the butt of the rifle to his shoulder, but fired from the hip.

There was a shriek from the bird, and with several feathers flying, the hawk sank fluttering to the ground. Digby Fordham uttered a cry of admiration.

"I declare!" exclaimed the stranger, as the boys

ran across the lot to secure the still fluttering bird. "I never saw a prettier shot — and him only a kid!"

He was gone when Chet and Dig returned with the dead hawk between them, each carrying the bird by an outstretched pinion.

"You gave me the laugh, Chet!" declared Dig, with enthusiasm. "I didn't think you could do it. Hello! where's that fellow gone?"

The stranger had disappeared. Just then, however, Mr. Fordham rode down from the mine and the boys hurried out to show Chet's prize and hear what news he had brought to Mr. Havens, who sat upon the front porch of the house with his wounded foot on a stool.

"Everything all right at the Silent Sue, Fordham?" Mr. Havens was asking. "I'm glad to know you're on the job. But I'm worrying about that other matter."

"About those deeds to the Crayton claim?" queried Mr. Fordham.

"Yes," said his partner. "The doctor says I shall be laid up here for three weeks. A lot may happen before I can get hold of John Morrisy. If we had somebody to send —"

Dig had been prodding Chet eagerly, and whispering in his ear. The other boy dropped the hawk and drew nearer.

"Can't Digby and I go to Grub Stake for you, Father?" he asked, timidly. "It's vacation, we've got good horses and know how to shoot if we need to, and I've heard you say yourself the trail is plain. Can't we go?"

Mr. Havens and Mr. Fordham looked at each other. To tell the truth, the gentlemen had discussed this very thing, only the boys did not know it.

"Your boy is all right," drawled Mr. Fordham, "but mine is such a scatter-brained youngster —"

"Oh, Dad! I promise not to scatter my brains — nor let them be scattered — if you say I can go with Chet to Grub Stake," cried Dig, utterly unable to keep silent another minute, so great was his eagerness.

CHAPTER IX

ON THE TRAIL TO GRUB STAKE

BUT it was not all settled in a minute. The affair was of a much too serious nature. First of all the boys were sent away while the fathers privately discussed the journey and what had to be done when once the messengers reached the town of Grub Stake, which was fully two hundred miles from Silver Run.

Banished from the front of the house Chet and Digby had an eager discussion of their own, while the former carefully skinned the hawk so that it could be mounted.

"Oh, Chet! we'll have just the Jim-dandiest kind of a time if they only let us go," sighed Digby Fordham.

"And we'll get a shot at those buffaloes," said Chet, his eyes sparkling.

"Oh, shucks, boy!" drawled Dig. "You've that big buffalo on the brain. I still declare that I don't believe there is any such animal."

"Just you take your heavy rifle along. It takes

94 The Trail Boys of the Plains

a sizable bullet to kill a bull buffalo. I am going to borrow father's big rifle."

"Say! they haven't said we could go yet!"

"Who else can go?" returned Chet. "If you'll only promise to behave —"

"Whew! how about you?"

"Well," answered Chet, "they didn't speak about me being scatter-brained," and he laughed.

"I vow," said Dig, "by *all* the hoptoads that were chased out of Ireland —"

"John Peep rather doubted if the toads went with the other reptilian species," chuckled Chet.

"Oh — hum! Well, anyway, I vow not to let my brains be scattered," Dig remarked. Then he added complainingly, "I think my father is rather hard on me."

"By the way," Chet said suddenly, "queer why John Peep left town to live up there in that shack."

"Give it up," said Dig. "Perhaps he wanted to be 'heap big Injun.' I reckon all redskins are queer."

"Now, Dig! Don't you talk that way. John made us hustle in school to keep anywhere near him in classes. You know it."

"Well! Tell us the news. Never mind about ancient history."

"I found out that John wanted to play on the school nine. You know, the club's going to play all this summer; some of the storekeepers have put up money to back it. And the captain and coach wouldn't let John play."

"What? By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland! I've seen him pitch —"

"I know. He's a great little pitcher," Chet interrupted. "He's a southpaw and he can puzzle most of 'em, you bet! It's a mean shame. John Peep got sore and left town. Maybe he was sick of his family, too. They're a lazy and dirty lot."

"Whew! Can't blame him for that," said Dig. "They're an unhealthy looking crowd. Old Scar-face whitewashes fences for a nickel an hour and they live in a dirty hole of a cabin down in Hardpan."

"John always looked neat and clean when he came to school."

"But see how he looked up there in the woods — like a reg'lar savage!" sniffed Dig. "Not half dressed — and living in that old shack. I wonder what he's doing now that his outfit is burned."

96 The Trail Boys of the Plains

"I believe that stranger burned it — the one we saw talking with him when we rode by," declared Chet earnestly. "And I never saw that man before — Oh, Dig!" and he suddenly made an excited grab for his chum's arm.

"Well, goodness! Don't scare a fellow to death. What's got you now?" demanded Digby Fordham.

"That fellow is the one we saw with the lame Indian."

"What fellow?"

"The man who butted in just now when I shot the hawk."

"Whew! you don't mean it?" said Dig.

"Yes, I do. I remember him now. I remember his hat. Now, who can he be?"

"Give it up! Hello! there's father calling for us. Oh, Chet! I hope they let us go to Grub Stake," said Dig, longingly.

Serious as was the errand to Grub Stake, Mr. Havens and Mr. Fordham were inclined to trust their sons more than ever before, and that because of one uncontrovertible fact.

When nobody else had thought of any way to rescue the entombed miners from the Silent Sue, Chet and Dig had remembered about the old Cray-

ton shaft and the possibility of getting into the closed mine through its old tunnel.

"It showed a surprising amount of thought and initiative for boys of their age," Mr. Havens said. "I don't know whether it was my boy or yours who took the lead, Fordham. At any rate, the two in conjunction hunted us out."

"Something is due the boys," admitted Mr. Fordham, "and the trip will be a great lark for them."

"It's more than a lark. I shall impress that on Chet's mind," said his partner, shaking his head.

"Oh! your boy's got a head on him," agreed Mr. Fordham.

"I hope so," concluded Mr. Havens, and it was then the chums were recalled to receive permission and instructions for the journey over the trail to Grub Stake.

Neither Chet nor Digby gave vent to any exuberance of joy at the prospect — not then, at least. They listened earnestly to what they were told, and then at once set about the preparations they had to make, for they were to start the very next morning.

Dig, who never went anywhere on foot if he could help it, brought his black horse, Poke, and all his outfit over to the Havens corral that evening.

98 The Trail Boys of the Plains

The boys proposed to camp in the open, there being no ranches at that date along the Grub Stake trail. So they were obliged to pack a good deal of camp equipment.

“We’d better hire one of Mexican Joe’s burros,” said Dig, “and then we can take our piano and your mother’s sewing machine and washtubs.”

“Don’t begin to kick,” Chet said calmly. “You’ll be glad to have all this stuff before we’re half-way to Grub Stake.”

“And we’ll sound like a procession of junkmen when we pass by,” grumbled his chum. “Talk about shooting game! Why, unless all the game is stone deaf, we won’t get within shot of a crippled mine rat!”

“No. I’ll pack this outfit so the tinware won’t rattle,” laughed Chet. “And we couldn’t take a burro. That would delay us. We want to be comfortable when we camp. After a long day’s ride, you’ll be the first one to call for a square meal.”

“Say! how long’s the trip going to take?” demanded Dig. “We’ll be back by the time school opens next fall, I suppose?”

“Don’t be so ridiculous,” responded Chet. “It’s

a rough trail, and if we go right on with no delays, but for sleep and meals, it will take all of three days."

"Whew! my Poke can do it in a day and a half."

"But why rush like that?" cried Chet. "We want some fun, don't we? This is no horse-race, I hope! And father says we can take our own time — especially coming back."

"I know what you're thinking about, Chet Havens!" cried his chum, in response. "You're thinking of those buffaloes."

"Well! and if I am?"

"Huh!" grunted Dig. "If any buffaloes ever see us with all this tinware and stuff aboard they'll hike out for the north and never stop running till they reach the Arctic Circle!"

Chet only laughed at him. He showed Dig how to pack the cooking utensils and the like in his blanket-roll so that they would not rattle. When they set out right after breakfast the next morning the compass of their outfit did not seem so great as Digby supposed it would.

Chet carried in an inside pocket of his woollen outing shirt the deeds in duplicate which he was to get Mr. John Morrisy to sign. The old prospector

who had never sold his interest in the Crayton claim was a queer, illiterate character, well known about Grub Stake.

Mr. Havens had instructed Chet just how to proceed with the business in hand, and the boy was quite sure he could do it all without a hitch. The money to be passed in exchange for Mr. Morrisy's signature was already on deposit with the Wells Fargo Company in Grub Stake; and of course Chet had no expectation of losing the deeds.

The horses were in fine fettle, and so were the boys, when they rode out of Silver Run. Each of the chums carried a heavy rifle slung over his shoulder and under his arm, the muzzle pointing down his bootleg. And you may be sure they were not loaded so that the hammer rested on a cartridge. The boys had long before been instructed as to the danger of that piece of carelessness.

They were well supplied with loaded shells, for the day of the muzzle-loading rifles, with the cumbersome shot-pouch and powder-horn was long past. Their revolvers were loaded, too, and each boy wore a keen hunting-knife in a sheath.

They expected to kill most of the meat they ate on the trail. Canned beans did not greatly appeal to

the trail boys; especially when they were sure there must be plenty of small game along the way.

They aimed to take a trail which wound through the hills to the west of the town and would lead then by mid-afternoon to the open plains. In going this way they passed through the poor suburb known as Hardpan. It was here the family of Lame John, the Cheyenne Indian, lived.

On one side of a littered lane were grouped a dozen lean cabins, with barren yards divided from one another by pickets, eked out with hogshead hoops, gate-bars of old wagons, hoopskirts, and like rubbish. Here and there an attempt had been made by some of the Hardpan women or girls to make flowers grow; but they were sorry gardens.

Across the lane the ground was open — part of it a dump for the refuse of the neighborhood. As Chet and Dig rode into the head of the driveway they heard a shrill chorus of cheers, intermixed with which was the “E-i! e-i! e-i!” of the Indian yell and the “Yee-ee-yip!” favoured by the cow-punchers of the ranges.

“Something doing, boy!” cried Dig to his chum, at once interested.

“Must be that attack on Silver Run by the Co-

manches you were telling your Cousin Tom about," said Chet, chuckling.

"I reckon it's a Cheyenne attack. Whew! Look at that! It's a ball game."

"No," said Chet. "It's Lame John pitching to his grandfather. Oh, look at that! Old Scarface has put on a glove and John is trying out his fast one."

"Whew!" blew Dig. "I must take a peep at that. Some little old southpaw, John is. He can show 'em!"

It was a spectacle worth watching. The inhabitants of Hardpan were out in force to see it.

There was a level diamond and surrounding "garden" cleared in the open lot. The spectators were gathered back of the foul lines, and among them were the boys who had recently been playing.

Now John Peep had stepped into the box to throw a few exhibition balls. The governors of the school nine had refused to accept the lame Indian boy as one of their pitching staff; to the Hardpanites he was, nevertheless, something of a hero. He was winding up for another drive just as Chet and Dig appeared, and the spectators held their breath.

Behind the plate stood a gnarled, lean old man in ragged, fringed leggings and a miner's cast-off shirt, with moccasins on his feet. His hair was as white as could be; but he was as alert and his eyes as bright as though he were a young man. Old Scarface, once a brave of the Cheyenne tribe, was over eighty years of age. When the ball smashed into his glove he threw it back to his grandson as smartly as any boy. His muscles were still supple and his eye true.

Although Chet and Dig did not know it, ball playing was not a strange sport to the American Indian. Most of the tribes were playing ball before Columbus discovered the New World. Only, of course, the rules of the game were entirely different from those of our own baseball.

"Say! the old man is great," declared Chet, reining in Hero.

"But look at that ball whiz!" murmured Dig, as John Peep sent in another one. "Why didn't the other fellows want him to play on the team? He could have somebody run for him; and he can bat, even if he has a short leg."

"Just didn't want him, that's all," said Chet. "But I notice that our nine has got licked in almost

every game they've played. And it's particularly weak in the pitching — Say! look at that one, will you?"

"E-i! e-i! e-i!"

"Yee-ee-yip! Yee-ee-yip!"

The crowd went wild. A boy had stepped up to the plate and tried to hit the ball. John Peep's curve seemed fairly to dodge the bat as the boy swung at it.

Old Scarface — as serious as a deacon — slammed the ball back to his grandson and squatted for the next one. The old Indian took the matter as seriously as he took everything else in life. Nobody ever saw the ancient Cheyenne "crack a smile," as Dig expressed it.

Two more balls followed the first in quick succession, and the batter tossed away his stick in disgust. He had only fanned.

Then John saw the two boys on horseback, and he tossed the ball to another boy. Scarface stepped out of the catcher's place and stood with folded arms beside the field. It was beneath his dignity to play ball save when his grandson wanted to pitch. Nobody in Hardpan but Scarface could "hold" the young Cheyenne's delivery.

The Indian lad ran over to the horsepath and asked Chet:

"You going to take trail?"

"Yes," said Chet. "We're hiking for Grub Stake."

"A-i! So I hear. You're not going near that shaft I showed you — that way into the old mine?"

"No," replied Chet. "We're not taking that trail."

"All right. You much better keep away from there," said John, and turned away.

"Say!" cried the too curious Digby, "who burned out your shack, John?"

"Never you mind," returned the Indian lad, and he showed anger in the expression of his face at this reminder of his loss. "I'll get my pay for that."

"I hope you do," commented Chet soothingly, and preparing to ride on. "We're all very thankful to you, John. My father would like to see you, if you'll go up to the house. You know, he's laid up for a while."

John Peep looked back at him sharply. "Ugh!" he grunted, in what Dig called his "red Indian style." "Ugh! Your father give Indian cast-off

106 The Trail Boys of the Plains

suit of clothes. Your mother give Indian meal of victuals. Then shake hand, say, 'Good-bye, Injun!' I don't need those things, Chet Havens."

"Well! by all the hoptoads that were chased out of Ireland!" murmured Dig.

But Chet said calmly: "That isn't the way my parents will treat you, John."

The Indian boy was still flushed and angry. "That isn't even my name!" he exclaimed. "'John' is white boy's name. They make me give it when I go to school. But it does not belong to me."

"Say! what is your name?" demanded Dig, his curiosity getting the better of his courtesy.

"Never you mind," responded the Indian boy sharply, and turned away again.

But Chet called after him: "Do think better of it, and go to see my father." Then he let Hero have his impatient head and he and his chum went on their way.

That which rose out of this advice of Chet's to the Indian lad could scarcely be foreseen by either of the boys; but it was of much importance.

The chums rode on, soon leaving the last of the scattered cabins behind them. They met timber

wagons from the hills, but nothing else for the next hour. The lumbermen looked curiously at the chums' weapons, for their guns were too heavy for an ordinary hunting expedition.

"What you goin' out after?" one timberman drawled. "Grizzlies — or is there an Injun up-risin'?"

"We expect to bag a brace of humming-birds," Dig told him gravely. "Have you seen any?"

"No; but I've heard 'em snorin', sound asleep, in the tops of some of them cottonwoods," was the reply. "But, say! They ain't been a trace of Ole Ephraim in these hills since Methuselah was put inter trousers." "Ole Ephraim" was the nickname the old-time hunters and trappers gave to the grizzly bear.

"Nor I didn't know of any redskins goin' on the warpath. Has Blacksnake's band of dog soldiers broke loose from the reservation?" pursued the man cheerfully. "Say! 'tain't old Scarface and his fam'bly begun crow-hoppin' — has they? If so, we sure will have a turrible mas-a-cree."

"That's all right," laughed Chet. "We're going to bag all the game in the territory — you see."

"Leave me a mess o' Molly Cottontails," said the

timberman, driving on. "I ain't had a rabbit with fixin's yet this season."

"And I shouldn't think he'd want it," grumbled Dig, as they left the man behind. "Who wants to eat rabbit this time o' year? I told you how it would be if we took these heavy guns, Chet. Folks will rig us to death. Huh! Buffalo! A fat chance!"

Chet only laughed at him. He had a deal more faith in the existence of the buffalo band that had been reported as roaming upon the plains, across which the trail to Grub Stake lay.

CHAPTER X

MR. HAVENS HAS A VISITOR

MR. HAVENS and his wife had bidden the chums good-bye when they rode away from the house on the outskirts of Silver Run, and watched them as they cantered off down the road. Chet's mother secretly feared something might befall her boy on his mission to Grub Stake; while Mr. Havens was only proud that he had a son whom he could trust in such an emergency.

When Mrs. Havens had retired to the house her husband sank comfortably back into his chair and relit his pipe. It was then he espied the stranger in the black slouch hat coming up the street.

Silver Run was not such a large town that the owner of the Silent Sue mine did not know most of its regular inhabitants, either by name or sight. This fellow he never remembered having seen before.

Nevertheless, when the man came opposite to the

110 The Trail Boys of the Plains

Havens' house, he crossed the road and came up to the porch on which Chet's father sat. He was a broadly smiling man; but his eyes did not smile. They were little and sharp and altogether too near each other to be honest.

"I reckon you're Mr. Havens?" queried the stranger, putting out a hand that Mr. Havens did not appear to see. He was busy re-tamping his pipe just then.

"Yes, sir," said the mine owner. "I'm the man."

"You've got an interest in a mine up yonder?" said the stranger, nodding toward the mountain that loomed above the town.

"Another man and I own the Silent Sue," was the serious answer.

"Shucks! I don't mean that," exclaimed the visitor jovially.

"What do you mean, then?" asked Mr. Havens. "Not that it's any of my business."

"Sure it's your business," cried the stranger. "I've come here to talk to you about it."

"About what?"

"The Crayton claim."

"Oh!" Mr. Havens eyed him silently and with

much curiosity. But he had learned to wait and let the other man do the talking. That was why he was so successful in business.

"Yes," said the stranger. "I got hold of a share of the Crayton claim in a curious way. And I'd like to own it all, Mr. Havens. I learn at the Office of Record that you own a part. Will you sell?"

"That's odd," said Chet's father slowly, and still examining the stranger with serious gaze. "I became possessed of a share of the claim in a curious way, too, and I want to control it. Will you sell, Stranger?"

"No. I tell you I want to buy," said the man, with some warmth. "I didn't come here to peddle my share."

"And I didn't ask you to come," said Mr. Havens softly. "I don't want to sell."

"I've come here prepared to buy," declared the man blusteringly.

"Sorry. Looks like a deadlock to me," said Mr. Havens coolly. "By the way, what is your name, Stranger?"

"Steve Brant. You don't know me," said the man ungraciously.

"No. You're not at home in Silver Run, I take it?"

"No, I'm not."

"Nothing particular to bring you here but a desire to buy my interest in the Crayton claim?"

"No," repeated the man.

"Then," drawled Mr. Havens, "there's nothing to keep you from taking the next stage-coach out. It leaves the Silver Run Hotel this afternoon at two."

The man who called himself Brant flushed dully under Mr. Havens' tone of raillery; but he managed to control his temper.

"You'd better think it over, Mr. Havens. I can give you a good trade."

"Don't want to trade."

"You're not the only man I can deal with!" exclaimed Steve Brant, looking at the mine owner slyly.

"No?"

"I can get control without buying *you* out."

"That so?" returned Mr. Havens with apparent curiosity.

"Yes. You're not the only one who owns a bit of the Crayton claim. There may not be ten cents'

worth of pay ore left in it, but I have a fancy to open it up."

"Everybody ought to be free to follow his fancy," said Mr. Havens cheerfully.

"But you'd better take your chance while you have it offered to you. I've only got to go to Grub Stake and buy," went on the visitor.

"That so? Then shares in the old claim are offered in Grub Stake?" queried Mr. Havens. "Never heard of that before."

"You don't know everything," sneered Steve Brant. "Old John Morrisy's never sold his share in the Crayton mine. I can get it and that will give me control."

"No," said Mr. Havens, quietly shaking his head.

"Why not, I'd like to know?" demanded Steve Brant angrily.

"Because I've got an option on John Morrisy's holdings — that's why, Stranger."

"What d'ye mean — option?"

"Just what I say. John's agreed to sell it to me."

"And you tied down here with a broken foot?" cried the other. "I know old John Morrisy. The

man who can show him ready cash first will get his share in the old diggings, sure!"

"You're so sure," sighed Mr. Havens. "Go ahead. You'll learn."

"You're bluffing."

"Go ahead. I might as well tell you, though," said Chet's father, "that I've got my money on the spot and the papers are on the way to Grub Stake right now. I reckon I've beat you to it, Stranger."

"Say! you don't know me," remarked Steve Brant threateningly. "I'm not so easily beaten."

"And I don't care whether I beat you or not. I never saw you before," said Mr. Havens; "and I don't care to see you again. But take it from me: I'm going to control the old Crayton claim. It won't be you. Mark that now!"

The mine owner had become a little heated. Now he sank back in his chair again, and puffed strongly on his pipe. He appeared to have no further interest in the discussion.

Steve Brant turned away from the porch — on which he had not been invited to sit — in plain wrath. He did not bid Mr. Havens good-bye, nor did the latter look after Brant when he walked down the street.

Had he done so he could not have heard what the man was saying to himself. He felt that Mr. Havens had the best of him — for the time, at least. And it made him very angry.

“Something has ’woke him up. He must know something about that old claim — he knows as well as I do,” muttered Steve Brant. “He’s in communication with old John Morrisy, is he?”

“By gracious! that’s where those boys were bound for when I saw them ride away this morning. I waited for them to get away first, for I was afraid they might have remembered my being up there with that young redskin.

“Ha! I’d like to see what kind of papers they carry. Old John Morrisy is a queer duck — and he can’t read. Pshaw! I ought to be able to get the better of a couple of boys. Now, why not? That Tony knows the trail like a book — Humph!

“If I’m not smarter than a couple of boys and a man that’s tied to his piazza like a poodle-dog I’ll eat my hat,” declared Steve Brant, as he turned the nearest corner below the Havens’ house.

Mr. Brant was evidently a man who would bear watching.

CHAPTER XI

THE FIRST ADVENTURE

As Chet Havens and Digby Fordham mounted into the hills, the country about them became wilder and quite free from signs of man's habitation. Even the behaviour of the birds and the squirrels was different from their conduct nearer town.

"I could knock the head off that fellow," Dig declared, referring to a big grey squirrel that flirted his tail and chattered in a tall hemlock not far off the trail, "if I only had my little rifle. This thing is a reg'lar elephant gun, Chet," and he shifted the heavy rifle to his other shoulder.

"Knock the head off it, hey?" repeated Chet.

"Not a very sportsmanlike way to get a squirrel."

"Huh! I'm not so particular how I get my game, as long as I get it. I don't claim to be a fancy shot like you, Chet."

"If you were like Davy Crockett, you'd say a squirrel didn't count in a game score if it wasn't

shot in the eye," chuckled Chet. "Of course, anybody can shoot the head off a squirrel."

"Whew!" ejaculated Dig. "Do you s'pose Davy always shot his squirrels in the eye? When a fellow wants a mess of squirrel pot-pie I don't believe he is going to trouble about which end he kills his squirrel at."

"He was a great shot, though," Chet remarked admiringly. "My grandfather saw him shoot in a match once, and he said Davy Crockett carried off every prize."

"I suppose all the yarns they tell about him are true," said Digby, his eyes twinkling; "but I always liked that one about his shooting the coon the best."

"What is that?" asked his chum innocently.

"Why," said Dig, "when the coon saw Davy Crockett aiming at him, he sang out:

"'Hol' on, Mars' Crockett! Don' shoot! I'll come down!'"

"That's a yarn, Dig," laughed Chet. "But it's a good one. Come on! Here's a straight piece of road. I'll race you."

"Hold on!" exclaimed Dig. "I've shaken down my breakfast enough already. Do you see those raspberries, Chet?"

“Cracky! what a lot of them!” cried Chet.

“Let’s have a mess of them,” his chum said eagerly, and leaped down from his saddle.

“Here! here!” called Chet. “Hitch your horse, old man. We don’t want to be chasing Poke all over the pasture.”

“All right. And hang your tinware on the saddle,” urged Dig, slipping the strap of his own rifle over the cantle after hitching Poke. He raced to the nearest clump of raspberry bushes as though he thought they would mysteriously disappear if he did not reach there in a minute.

Chet climbed more slowly after him out of the well-defined trail into the rocky berry pasture. Both boys were unarmed save for the knives in their belts, for even their revolvers were in their saddle holsters. The bushes hung heavy with the ripe fruit and Dig, who was inordinately fond of the berries, at once filled both hands and began to cram the fruit into his mouth.

“Look out! you’ll choke yourself,” his chum admonished him.

“Don’t you worry, old boy,” mumbled Dig, still eating greedily. “It would be a lovely way of dyin’—”

Just then, as though conjured for Dig's particular punishment, there rose up on the other side of the clump of raspberry bushes a shaggy, black figure, almost within reach of Dig's outstretched arm.

"Oh! oh! ah!" gasped Digby. "It's yo — your buf — buffalo, Chet!" and he fell back upon his chum, the crushed raspberries running out of his mouth in two streams.

"What's the matter with you?" asked his chum, who did not, on the instant, observe the object that had surprised Dig. "Stop joking about that buffalo."

"Give me a gun! Give me a gun!" groaned the other boy, his mouth finally freed from the crushed fruit.

Then Chet saw the bear — a big black fellow, standing erect, and to all appearances just as scared as Digby Fordham was.

It had the funniest expression on its muzzle. Its jaws were all beslobbered with crushed raspberries, as were its paws. It had been pressing the berries into its mouth just as Dig had been doing, and Chet thought the sight of the two — the boy and the bear — was one of the funniest he had ever seen.

The bear's little ears were cocked, and its eyes were amazingly sharp. But its surprise was plain and it staggered back just as Dig had done.

"Give me a gun!" begged the latter again, hoarsely.

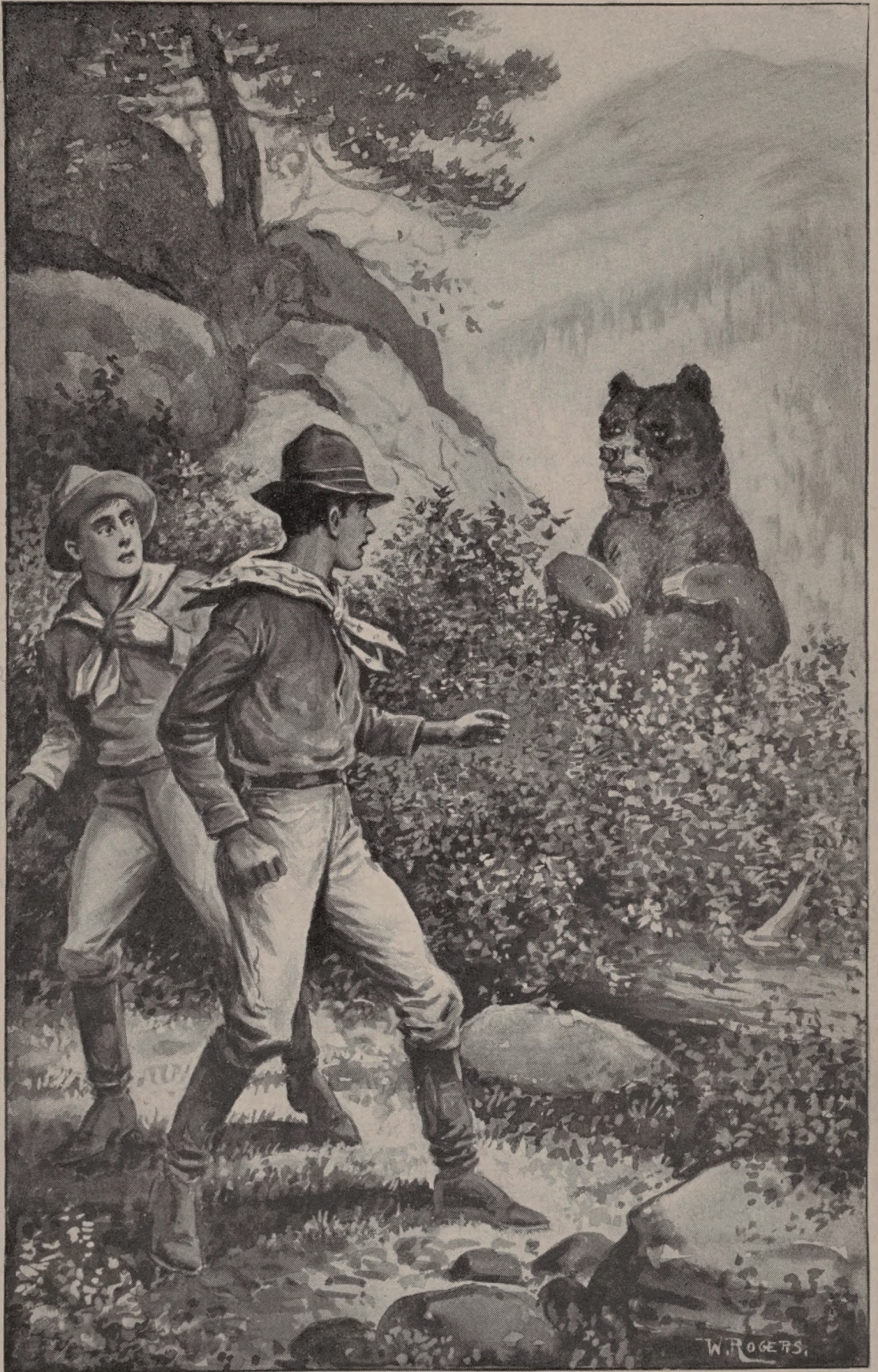
The bear turned and both boys thought it was coming around the clump of bushes to get at them. Dig uttered a squeal of fright and tumbled backwards down the hill. Chet whipped out his skinning-knife, that being the only weapon he had with him, and stood his ground.

But the bear only swung around to drop to all fours, and with a startled "Woof! woof!" he galloped away across the hill, soon disappearing in the thick jungle.

But the bear had startled something besides Digby Fordham. While Chet hugged his sides in laughter at the sight of his chum sprawling down the hill, wild snorts and a sudden clatter rose from the trail.

"Look out for the horses, Dig!" yelled Chet, breaking off his spasm of laughter in the middle.

Poke had caught a glimpse of the bear or had smelled him. The black horse flung himself back upon his strap and snapped it.



Then Chet saw the bear—a big black fellow,
standing erect

“Whoa, Poke!” cried Dig, and ran quickly down the hill.

Yelling “Whoa!” to a whirlwind would have done about as much good. Poke started on a gallop, and when his master rolled down to the trail the black horse was already three lengths away.

Hero did not try to escape. Perhaps his nostrils were not so sensitive to the smell of the bear. But his master hurried to soothe him.

Poke shook off the swinging rifle at almost his first leap, and its striking his heels frightened the horse all the more. Then he began to strew Dig’s camping outfit along the trail, one piece at a time.

Following the rifle, the pistol was tossed out of its holster — Dig had forgotten to fasten the flap of the pocket. His lasso was only hung on the saddle horn and that dropped off, banging the galloping horse about the heels.

Dig, running after him, yelled “Whoa!” until he almost lost his voice, but to no purpose.

The blanket roll became unfastened and it whipped Poke over the flanks. One article after another was spewed from the roll, and after striking the frightened horse, bounded off into the trail or beside it.

A can of condensed milk hit a boulder and burst. A skillet was kicked into the air as Poke ran, and when it was found there was a hole through it as big as one's fist.

"By all the hoptoads that were chased out of Ireland! That creature never will stop."

"Get on my horse, Dig," begged his chum.

"All right. But unhitch all that truck. I'll take your lariat."

"Going to lasso Poke?" demanded Chet, still much amused.

"I don't care if I hang him," declared Dig, leaping on the bay horse, and whirling him into the trail.

Dig was a splendid rider. No matter how hard-bitted the horse was he rode, he always made a good appearance in the saddle. The black horse could outrun the bay; but Poke lacked the guidance of his master's hand. He was still going at a heavy gallop, and Hero gained upon him at every leap.

The camp equipment was still dropping out of Dig's blanket-roll, and as long as that occurred Poke would undoubtedly run. Dig rose up in Hero's stirrups, uncoiled the rope, and prepared to

cast it over the black's head when he got near enough.

Meanwhile Chet came on behind, loading himself down with the scattered camp outfit and the rifles. He was soon too heavily laden to travel fast; besides, he had to stop now and then to laugh.

Poke gave his master a two-mile chase, and then Dig roped him and brought the black horse back with him at the end of the lariat.

"I'd trade him for a cast-off pair of boots, and then swap the boots for a broken-bladed jack-knife," grumbled Dig, who always made frightful threats against Poke when the black horse had misbehaved. "Whew! I thought I'd have to walk all the way to Grub Stake by the way this villain started."

Chet was choked with laughter again. Dig turned on him sternly.

"Say! what's the matter with you now?" he demanded. "What are you laughing at?"

"I — I wonder if that — that buf — buffalo you thought you saw is still — still running," cried Chet, holding his aching sides.

CHAPTER XII

A MAVERICK

IN spite of the delay, the boys had made good progress on the Grub Stake trail when they stopped for a bite at noon. They were well through the foothills, the tall mountain in which were located the silver mines above Silver Run, was behind them, and the trail had become only a faint trace, yet easily followed because of the nature of the country.

Now and again they had obtained glimpses of the open plains through the gullies between the wooded hills — here a great stretch of lawn covered with short buffalo grass; yonder an open piece of country strewn with brilliant flowers.

As they sat on their haunches, cowboy fashion, beside the dying fire over which the coffee had been boiled, the chums suddenly saw a flight of swiftly bounding little animals cross the line of their vision. They passed across the opening between two hills to the north and were gone in a breath.

“Whew! did you see them?” gasped Dig, almost spilling his coffee.

"I saw something," admitted Chet.

"What I want to know is, did you see the same thing I did?" pursued Dig, grinning. "They went so fast I didn't know but I had 'em again."

"I can assure you that you didn't have those again. They're almost too quick to lasso. They're antelopes."

"Whew! I'd like to catch one; but I never do have any luck catching things, unless it's measles, or something perfectly useless."

"Too bad, too bad!" said Chet pityingly, and quoted:

"'Twas ever thus since childhood's hour
My fondest hopes I've seen decay. . . .
I never loved a dear gazelle—'"

"Waugh!" grunted Dig. "What's a gazelle?"

"It's something like an antelope."

"Well, it sounds awfully mushy. I'd like to catch one of 'em to eat."

"Sorry," said Chet, throwing out the remainder of his coffee. "But it would take a long time to trail those fellows. Maybe we'll try it on our way back."

"We're going to fast, then, going over to Grub Stake?" suggested Dig, complainingly. "This sort

126 The Trail Boys of the Plains

of a snack isn't going to keep me in the saddle for long."

"Perhaps we'll come across a deer, poor boy," said Chet soothingly. "I shouldn't wish you to starve. You know, the redman only pulled his belt the tighter when he had to go without food, and did not complain."

"That's all right. I'll leave that to John Peep. When little Dig Fordham gets hungry you're going to hear a holler — be sure of that."

"Keep your eye open for deer, then — or, when we get in the open, for sage hens or quail."

"I'd rather have a supper of deer liver," Dig returned, smacking his lips at the thought.

"Well, maybe we can shoot a deer. They are not so swift as the antelope."

"But aren't antelope easily trapped? I've heard Rafe Peters tell about catching them with a red rag tied to a stalk."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Chet. "You mean he toled them near enough with a red rag to pot-shoot them. The little creatures are very curious."

"Oh! then you shake salt on their tails, I s'pose?" grumbled Dig.

Chet had to laugh at this. But both boys, after

the noon halt, kept a bright outlook for game. Their supper actually depended upon the discovery of some game which they might capture.

An hour after their noontide stop the chums rode out upon a plain from between two heavily wooded hills. This open space was a great, level valley, through which a stream ran, and it should have been a paradise for ruminant animals.

There was the shelter of the hills on both the east and north; the clear, placid stream; the abundant grass and low bushes; with sufficient shade along the watercourse to attract the herds.

"Hello!" exclaimed Dig suddenly. "What's been digging up the prairie in that way? Why, Chet! did you ever see the like?"

"Yes, I have," returned his chum. "You know, when I went to Benway with father that time, we travelled for a week with a herd."

"A herd? Cattle, do you mean?" exclaimed Dig.

"Yes."

"You don't mean to say this is a cattle trail?" demanded the other boy, drawing the black horse to a stop at the edge of a wide track in the sodded land, and gazing at it wonderingly.

“That’s what it is. More than twice as wide as the street we live in, Dig. See how the cattle’s sharp hoofs have cut it up? The herd we were with was a great sight. The column was a mile long, the cattle trotting along as they pleased, and seemingly of their own accord.”

“But didn’t the cowpunchers hurry ’em on, and crack their quirts and shoot guns to hurry them and all that?”

“Of course not,” said Chet, with disgust. “How much fat would there be left on a steer, do you suppose, if they were treated that way on the trail? I didn’t see a man carrying a whip, and we rode with them nearly a week.

“Everything was quiet; nobody shouted; nobody seemed to bother the cattle at all.”

“But there must have been lots of cowpunchers on hand, so that if the cattle stampeded —” Dig urged.

“There weren’t but eleven men with that herd,” Chet told him. “I tried to find out all about the herd and how they handled them. You see, the men in the lead were called ‘point men,’ those riding along the sides of the herd were the ‘swing

men' and the one who brought up the rear was the 'drag man.'

"In addition, there was the cook, who drove the chuck wagon, and the horse wrangler, who had charge of the remuda of a hundred and fifty ponies. 'Remuda' means relay, you know."

"Ugh-huh!" grunted Dig. "But didn't they stop to graze? Why, according to this trail, the cattle went right through the finest kind of grass without taking a bite."

"This was a big herd," said Chet, eying the cut-up sod seriously. "But, of course, they grazed. The way they did it when father and I travelled with them was this: An hour before noon one of the point men whistled and the whole column of beeves turned aside and went to grazing. They called it 'throwing the herd off the trail to graze.'"

"Great!" exclaimed his chum.

"When it was time to start on, the men gathered them, got them headed right, and all settled into the trail again."

"But how about the nights, Chet?" inquired Digby. "How could eleven men handle such a large herd?"

130 The Trail Boys of the Plains

“Why,” said Chet, “they threw the herd off the trail to graze and to water just the same. The men were divided into watches, something like the watches at sea. Those on watch rode around and around the herd. If the cattle were uneasy they sang.”

Dig chuckled. “Sang what?” he asked. “‘Rock-a-bye-baby’ and the like?”

“No,” laughed Chet. “One fellow didn’t know anything but ‘Beulah Land’—and after you’ve heard it sung a thousand times, you get tired of it. The regular cattle-herding songs have hundreds of verses to them; but the tunes get monotonous, too, after a while.”

“I should think so!” ejaculated Digby. “D’you know, I thought cattle herding was more boisterous.”

“You’ve driven cows to pasture, haven’t you?”

“Yes. For old man Feltman. He has seven,” Digby said.

“Multiply his seven by a thousand and you have a good-sized trail herd. Only there will be more crippled and strayed animals left behind a regular herd. And coyotes, wolves, and bears to pick them up.”

"Whew! Maybe we can find a wolf on this trail," cried Dig.

"I hope not! There's nothing wickeder in this country than a grey wolf," declared Chet Havens.

"Why! I thought they were cowards. Everybody says: 'As cowardly as a wolf.'"

"Then everybody is mistaken," said Chet firmly. "Don't you fool yourself. They are not like coyotes. Rafe has told me that an old she wolf, especially with young, will go out of her way to attack man."

"Gidap!" exclaimed Dig. "Rafe was stringing you."

"I don't think so. And when they run in packs, I've read that wolves are very dangerous indeed."

"Well! we might find a maverick along this trail," urged Dig. "Say! a yearling that hadn't been branded might sell for a few dollars at Grub Stake."

"Goodness me! Do you think for a minute we can stop to drive a doggy all the way to Grub Stake?" laughed Chet.

"Huh! you'd stop for that big buffalo, all right, all right, if you saw him."

"I expect I would," admitted his chum.
"Wouldn't you?"

"If I ever see a buffalo — Say, Chet! why do they call them 'mavericks'?"

"They don't."

"What d'you mean, they don't? Of course they do. Unbranded calves —"

"Oh!" chuckled Chet. "You got me twisted. I thought you meant the buffaloes."

"Oh! Don't be funny."

"Why, mavericks are unbranded cattle — usually yearlings. Called such, so I've read, because a certain cattleman in Texas, named Colonel Maverick, refused to brand his cattle. All the other cattle owners did, so Maverick claimed all unbranded stock."

"Oh!"

"It was a sharp trick, you see," Chet said. "He gathered in lots of cattle that way. Cowpunchers made a joke of it at first. They called every stray and unbranded beast a 'maverick.' The name stuck."

The boys crossed the cattle trail, for it came up from the south through a pass between the hills there, while the faint trace they were following took

them almost due west. The stream flowed with them, and during the afternoon they were never far from its bank.

Therefore they started up several groups of animals that were either feeding near the river or were drinking — a second small herd of antelopes (or possibly the same herd they had caught a glimpse of before), a pair of red deer, coyotes uncounted, and some animal that went crashing off through the willows, which they did not see, but which Dig declared made as much noise as a heavy freight.

“Your big buffalo, I bet, Chet,” he chuckled. “That’s the only chance you’ll have of knocking him over.”

“Maybe not,” his chum said cheerfully.

“Talking of knocking something over,” pursued Digby, “what are we going to have for supper? There’s nothing hearty left in my pack but a condensed milk tin. All these creatures seem to spot us half a mile off.”

“The birds don’t,” said Chet, unmoved.

“What have you in this outfit to shoot sage hens with?” growled Digby. “If you’d have let me bring a shotgun—”

His grumbling was stopped almost instantly.

Chet had been riding with the six-shooter loosened in its case while his eyes roved all about them as the horses walked.

He threw up his left hand in warning to Dig and spoke in a low voice to Hero:

“Whoa, Hero! Stand still!”

Dig drew his black horse to a stop, being half a length behind the bay. Chet threw the long barrel of the pistol across his left forearm just as a flock of grouse whirred up from the grass ahead.

Chet Havens' arm-rest was as steady as an iron bracket. Hero stood like a statue. Crack! crack! crack! Three of the prairie hens fluttered to the ground while the others disappeared beyond the willows across the river.

“Whew!” yelled Dig, clambering down from his saddle. “There's our supper.”

He threw his lines to his chum while he ran to pick up the birds.

“By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland! you shot the head off of one of these, Chet.”

“That is the first one I shot,” returned his chum calmly, pushing fresh cartridges into his revolver and leaving the hammer resting on an empty shell.

"Talk about Davy Crockett!" chuckled Digby. "I believe you've got him beaten — with a six-shooter, anyway."

"Reckon you're right," admitted Chet. "Davy never saw such a gun as this. But what would we do with a long barreled squirrel rifle with the flint filed to a sharp point and a few grains of powder sprinkled in the pan? I bet we'd starve on this journey, Dig."

"Huh! Maybe. But we're not going to starve to-night," returned his chum with assurance, and tying the legs of the grouse to his saddle.

This trail to Grub Stake had never been a wagon trail, and for some months it had scarcely been used; therefore its trace was dim in places. Chet had been told the landmarks to follow by his father, however, and through this first valley there was no chance of the boys going astray.

They would not get out of this valley until the next day. The horses had not been driven hard, save when Poke ran away from the bear, but they had brought the boys a good many miles from Silver Run before sunset.

They made camp in a grove on the river's bank. The sun had dropped behind the western range and

night was coming fast. Chet was making the fire and skinning the grouse. Dig hobbled the horses nearby, where the grazing was good, and then went along the river bank to see if there was a spring, the water of which would be fresher and colder than the river water.

And in stumbling along through the bushes in the half-darkness Dig Fordham fell upon his next adventure. Chet suddenly heard a mighty thrashing and bellowing in the brush. Dig's voice rose in excitement:

"Bring your rope, Chet! Bring your rope! I have a deer!"

His chum did not believe him, but he did as Dig said and ran with the lariat coiled and ready in his hand. Only a few yards away he came upon his chum on the back of some animal, struggling in the mud beside the river. Dig had his arms around the creature's neck, and was hanging on for dear life.

"I have him! I have him!" cried Dig.

"Looks as though he had you," laughed Chet.

The creature had evidently been lying in the mud and Dig had fallen over him. Chet slipped the

noose over the head of the animal and then advised his chum to rise.

"You're frightening the poor thing to death," he said, for it was bawling as well as struggling. And its voice was unmistakable to Chet's ear.

"Whew! I fell right over that deer," gasped Dig, getting up as the creature danced around at the end of the rope, trying to get away from Chet.

"Deer! Your grandmother's hat!" Chet said scornfully. "You fell on a calf — that's what you fell on. Don't you know a deer from a calf?"

"Calf?" repeated the chagrined Dig. "Where did it come from? There's no ranch around here, is there?"

"This is what you were looking for," laughed Chet. "It's a maverick. It likely strayed from the last bunch of cattle that went over the trail we crossed. But how under the sun it managed to escape the coyotes and lions and bears is a mystery to me. Poor little fellow!"

"Come on!" exclaimed Dig. "We'll drag him back to camp, and I'll gentle him. We aren't travelling very fast, Chet, and we can lead him to-morrow."

138 The Trail Boys of the Plains

“ Well! I’d rather you tried it than that I should,”
his chum said grimly, handing him the end of the
rope. “ Go to it, boy!”

CHAPTER XIII

“THE DOG SOLDIERS”

THE maverick was not a happy addition to the camping party — not at first, at least. Dig tied him to a tree, giving him the length of the lariat to tangle himself up in; and he did just that.

Three times during supper Dig had to get up and unwind the rope to save the creature from choking himself to death. His plaintive “bla-att” might bring night-prowling beasts from the distant hills.

In fact, Chet could not easily figure out how the yearling had escaped becoming the prey of some flesh-eating brute ere this, save that the season was in his favour.

The bears had plenty of berries and other forest fruit. In the winter or in the early spring after his hibernation, Bruin would have stalked this maverick as cleverly as any wolf.

The latter creatures were not plentiful in the hills now, and the coyotes were so cowardly they would not pull a bull calf down unless it was a crip-

ple — especially when there was plenty of smaller game.

The mountain lion is always hungry; but he does not often come out of the hills save when a herd of cattle is being wintered in some well-watered valley like this in which the chums from Silver Run were encamped. Then the cougar will slink down and lurk on the outskirts of the herd to catch a cow and calf away from the protection of their mates.

“Your maverick struck a fat time in this valley, Dig,” Chet said. “It’s escaped all beasts of prey save man. What are you going to do with it? It’s rather old for veal; but I expect he’d be fair eating — would give us all the steaks we’d need between here and Grub Stake.”

“I reckon not!” exclaimed Digby Fordham. “We’re not going to butcher him.”

“What then?”

“I tell you I’m going to lead him to Grub Stake.”

“Cracky! you’ll surely bite off an awful mouthful to chew,” laughed Chet. “It is a hundred and sixty or seventy miles to Grub Stake, and that maverick will pull back every foot of the way.”

“I don’t care,” said Dig obstinately. “I can sell him if I get him to Grub Stake.”

"Waugh!" said Chet, laughing. "Who do you suppose would want this little, scrawny red-and-white doggy?"

"Don't call him names, Chet. Poor little fellow," said Dig. "Wonder if he'd like a leg of this grouse to pick?"

"Or a cup of coffee?" suggested his chum.

But Dig was very much interested in his new possession. He was up two or three times in the night to see if he were tangled in the rope.

"The maverick ought to be 'gentled' very quickly," Chet said; "he is receiving enough attention."

The boys did not try to keep watch. They looked for no danger, and the horses feeding near the camp would give notice of the approach of any wild animal.

There was no disturbance and the chums finally slept soundly beneath their blankets till morning. Indeed, the bawling of the yearling for water after sunrise was what awoke them.

"Say!" yawned Chet, rising and stretching. "We're a fine pair of travellers—I don't think! We won't get started as early this morning as we did yesterday. Let's hurry breakfast."

“No, no!” objected Digby. “Hurry anything but the meals.”

Nevertheless, Chet allowed only bacon, flapjacks and coffee to be prepared, although Digby had brought fishing tackle and begged for enough time to try for the catfish in the river.

“I just know there are catfish as long as your arm down under that bank,” he declared. “They’d go fine, Chet. Why eat bacon when you might have a nice catfish flapping in the pan?”

Chet, however, had made up his mind that they ought to make fairly good time on the trail until they should pass the second line of foothills. Then they would reach the broader plains, on which it was reported the herd of buffaloes had been seen. If the expedition to Grub Stake was to be delayed at all, he hoped it would be delayed only by the huge buffalo and its mates, of which the men about the Silent Sue shaft had spoken.

“We don’t want to be fooling around here with a mess of catfish,” he said to Dig, “when we may be able, later, to get a shot at something worth while.”

“Oh, Chet!” exclaimed Digby, “you’ve got that buffalo on the brain and nothing else is going

to suit you. Bet you we lug these heavy rifles clear to Grub Stake and don't get a shot."

"Never mind; you've captured a deer, Dig," said his chum soothingly. "And you say you are going to lead it with you."

"So I am!" snapped Dig. "I can be pig-headed just as well as you can."

But something almost immediately happened to cheer Dig up and avert any quarrel between the chums. It was something that held them at the camp by the river for a while, too.

As it fell out, breakfast was finished and the pots and pans washed. Their blanket-rolls were repacked and all was ready for saddling, when a torrent of pounding hoofs reached their ears.

"Stampede!" yelled Chet, starting for the edge of the grove.

"What of — buffaloes?" demanded his friend, following in a more leisurely fashion.

Chet first came to the edge of the grove, where he could see back along the trail by which they had come from Silver Run. There was a cloud of dust which shrouded a number of horsemen; but how many were coming, and who they were, the boy could not at first imagine.

Then, out of the cloud, as it slowed up, appeared a band of frowsy ponies, most of them piebald. They were ridden by Indians — and rather savage looking ones at that.

Chet Havens had never seen so many redmen before, save at a show. They were stripped to the waist and wore only fringed leggings and moccasins. There were feathers in their topknots; yet Chet, seeing them closer, knew that those feathers were not worn because they were “braves” and had killed their enemies in battle.

These were only Indian youths out on a frolic or a hunt, none of them being much older than Dig and himself. But how they did ride! They had only a cloth over their ponies' backs and each rode with a single rein to guide his half wild brute.

Each young redskin carried a rifle and they all tossed them up as high as they could reach when they saw the two white boys appear from the river-side. Then, at a signal from their leader, they flung themselves to the far side of their mounts, and circled out from the trail, passing the amazed Chet and Dig, only one hand and a foot of each Indian showing, their ponies still tearing along at a great pace. In wartime the Indians performed

this trick, shooting at their enemies under the ponies' necks.

Dig had brought his gun, and when he heard the "E-i! e-i! e-i!" of the Indian yell he was a little scared.

"What kind of a game is this?" he wanted to know of Chet. "By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland! those yelling galoots look as though they meant business."

"Shucks, boy!" said Chet, "you know there are no more wild Indians."

"Huh! if those fellows are not wild, what are they? And whew! how they can ride!"

"That's John Peep in the lead," Chet said. "Though what he's doing away over here I can't imagine."

"Huh! I'll get even some way!" threatened Digby. "Scaring a fellow out of half a year's growth!"

The cavalcade came back, the sweat-streaked faces of the riders grinning. Dig said to his chum:

"A great mess of 'dog soldiers.' Whew! you can't cure an Indian of his old tricks. I bet right now they'd like to scalp us."

"Don't see how they'd ever perform the opera-

tion on you," laughed Chet, "with that prize-fighter's cut you have."

Chet noticed that all of the young fellows that Dig called "dog soldiers" were fine looking boys. In the old days the young braves that could not be controlled by the chiefs, but who desired to go to war and make names for themselves, were called "dog soldiers."

"Hello, John!" shouted Chet. "What are you doing over here? Last time we saw you, you were playing baseball. You must have hustled some to catch us."

The Cheyenne dropped off his pony's back and the animal went to cropping the grass at once, and hungrily. Chet decided that the party had been travelling for some hours and that the ponies had had no chance for grazing, but had been watered when the band crossed the river.

John glanced at Chet in rather an odd manner; but true to his national trait he did not answer the question directly.

"We go on hunt," John Peep said. "Mebbe stay week; mebbe longer. These boys all my friends," and he waved his hand at the young riders who waited to be asked to dismount. "Not all Chey-

enne. Sioux — Pawnee — Ogallala. All go to Government school at Benway. Vacation now, like us. We make breakfast with you."

The customs of the trail must prevail. The white boys had finished their meal, but nobody ever denied the hospitable rite on the plains. The first party at a camping place was bound to ask the new-comers to join them. But here were ten or twelve hearty appetites suddenly to be appeased.

"All right," grunted Dig. "I could do something to another breakfast. We only had an apology for one, as I told you, Chet."

Chet sighed; but he felt, too, that John Peep had not come down this trail without cause. He wondered if, perhaps, the young Indians had heard of the buffaloes and were on their way to hunt for them.

"Don't say anything about the big buffalo, Dig," he whispered to his chum, as they hurried back through the grove. "I hope they don't know anything about it. And what they don't know won't hurt them."

"All right, boy! I won't tell them any fairy tales," said Dig.

Chet stirred up the fire, and mixed some prepared

148 The Trail Boys of the Plains

pancake flour, and put on the coffee pot. Some of the Indians joined Digby in catching fish. They had much more primitive tackle than the white boy; but the catfish bit so hungrily that it scarcely mattered whether the bait was let down to them on "store tackle" or on a thorn from a whitethorn bush.

"Say!" exclaimed Dig, "somebody besides us was hungry for breakfast. These cats are ravenous. Whew! look at that one!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE WARNING

As fast as the catfish were caught they were skinned and dressed. Chet had sliced all the bacon they had brought with them; he told Dig that the way they were feasting now pointed to a fast for the rest of their trip to Grub Stake.

“Don’t worry,” advised his chum. “Let’s give these Indians a good meal for once. They’re good fellows.”

Chet, as chief cook, was hampered by the size of his skillet; Poke had kicked a hole in the largest one the day before. But John Peep cooked the fish for the most part, while Chet fried flapjacks.

And no old cook with a trail outfit could toss a flapjack better than Chet Havens. One of the Indian lads brought clean pieces of bark — one for each person — and Chet slid the cakes on to these make-shift dishes. The fish were handed about on the same platters. There was plenty of seasoning besides the general good appetite.

“Don’t talk!” grumbled Dig. “By this time I don’t know whether I had any breakfast early or not. Don’t be stingy with the cakes, Chet.”

But his chum got tired of tossing flapjacks after a while; to tell the truth, his arm got lame. Then John Peep tried it. The chums discovered that these Indian lads did not call each other by the outlandish names that white people had bestowed upon them. They all spoke of John Peep as “Amoshee,” and Chet quickly began to address him by his Indian name, too.

There was a lot of fun at that breakfast. Indian boys are not like whites in all things, it is true; but they are not lacking in a sense of humour, and as these sat about the campfire in the glade, jokes and quips passed to and fro as they might have at a gathering of white boys.

Chet “counted noses” and said to Amoshee:

“Say, they froze you out of our ball club, but why don’t you have one of your own? Here’s enough of you boys to make up a good nine.”

The Indian lad’s eyes brightened, and he looked proudly around the circle of faces. Their racial features were pronounced; there wasn’t a redskin

boy there that could not trace his line back to some big chief of the olden time when the Indian was master of these plains and hills.

"Heap good boys," Amoshee grunted, but smiled, too, for he only used English in that barbarous way in fun, or when he was excited. Out in the open like this, having thrown off all the shackles of civilisation, his natural thoughts and instincts rose to the surface. "Heap good boys," he said again, and with pride.

"I should say they were!" exclaimed Chet, with enthusiasm. "Look at that tall fellow yonder. Couldn't he reach the high ones out in centrefield? My! And that little, squatty fellow — *what* a shortstop he'd make! Say! don't they know anything about baseball?"

Amoshee smiled rather pityingly upon his white friend.

"They all play baseball at school — and football, and ev'rything else. I want to go away to Government school if my grandfather will let me."

"Say! then you've got a nine ready-made to your hand. Practise a little," said Chet. "Get to working together well, and then challenge our high school

nine. It would serve them right if you licked them. You've a delivery that would puzzle most of them, I tell you."

Amoshee, otherwise John Peep, thought well of the scheme, it was plain. But meanwhile Digby Fordham and the other Indians had been hatching out something entirely different.

It was already nine o'clock, but Dig was not ready for the trail yet. He had been bragging with the Indians about ponies and riding. Now they had to prove out each other's prowess.

"Oh, Dig!" complained Chet. "We'll never get away."

"Be still!" grinned his chum, knowing what was really troubling Chet. "That old bull buffalo will wait for you, don't fear."

"Hush!" warned Chet again.

He had learned from Amoshee that the party of Indian lads was going north on this hunting trip. He did not believe they had heard anything about the herd of buffaloes, and he did not propose to tell them.

Few hunters crossed these valleys and hills at this time of year, and only two men whom he knew of had chanced upon the buffaloes. Neither had been

prepared to stalk the beasts, and Chet hoped that nobody else had been along the Grub Stake trail beside which the buffaloes seemed to be feeding.

Meanwhile the Indians were catching their ponies. They did not hobble them as the white boys did, but picketed them out at the end of their lariats. The scrubby little beasts did not look either fast or trustworthy; but Chet and Dig knew what they could do.

They had seen Indians perform on horseback before. With but one line twisted about the pony's lower jaw, and without even a cloth on its back, an Indian can ride and perform evolutions that are really remarkable.

On the great lawn outside the grove in which they had camped, the Indian youths performed all manner of tricks. Amoshee was one of the best, for on the back of a pony he was the equal of any of his mates. His shortened leg did not count against him there.

They hung by their heels while the ponies scoured the plains, running in a circle. Two rode swiftly, side by side, and picked up a third who lay as though dead on the prairie, and bore him off at full gallop. Two rode from opposite sides and actually changed ponies as they passed!

"Now, white boy," said the big fellow whom Chet wanted to see in centrefield. "Show what him do."

Dig was nothing loath. He stripped Poke and brought him out with neither saddle nor bridle. Meanly as the black horse sometimes acted, this was not an occasion when he was likely to play the run-away.

He seemed to understand that there was a contest, and he liked to show off just as well as did his master. The presence of the ponies made him snort and toss his mane; and in the corral he would doubtless have tried to bite them. But he obeyed his master's voice and hand — even his whistle — now, with most exemplary promptness.

Dig did not try to equal the Indian boys' tricks; but he had others of his own. He mounted and dismounted while Poke was on the run. He made the mustang lie down under him and roll over, Dig standing on the horse all the time and never once touching the ground.

He rode both kneeling and standing on the mustang's bare back. Then he cinched on the saddle, dropped his kerchief on the sod and picked it up with his teeth, Poke running like a wolf meanwhile.

Amoshee and his friends hailed this last feat as the greatest and they all shook Dig by the hand.

“Guess they think I’m some pumpkins,” Dig said to his chum. “I reckon there isn’t anything a red-skin can do that a white man can’t beat him at.”

Of course, he said this when none of the visitors could hear him. Now the Indian lads wanted to see Chet shoot. Probably Amoshee had told them that young Havens excelled in that.

The Indian boys themselves had only the cheapest kind of rifles, and no pistols at all. The chums had their revolvers, and the heavy rifle that Chet had brought with him was almost the equal of a cannon for distance. And the accuracy of its shooting was far superior to that of the Indians’ guns.

So Chet pitted himself with his pistol against the rifles of Amoshee and his friends. At distance marks the Indian boys thought they had Chet beat; but after they had all plugged away at the target, none of them hitting very near the centre, Chet paced ten paces back of the line from which they had shot and came within half an inch of the bull’s-eye at his first shot. With his remaining five bullets he riddled the target.

156 The Trail Boys of the Plains

Then he leaped aboard Hero and showed them some fancy shots with his horse on the run. He and Dig had practised so much in the corral at home that Chet had really become wonderfully expert. Pistol shooting is a matter of eye and practice. Ordinarily one must have a big target to hit with a six-shooter.

The morning was growing old. Even the Indians began to wish to get on. Amoshee drew Chet Havens aside and said:

“I took your advice and went to see Mr. Havens.”

“Bully for you!” exclaimed Chet. “I know my father will be glad to do something for you, if you’ll let him.”

“But I didn’t see him, Chet,” the Indian lad said calmly.

“You didn’t see him?”

“No. He had a visitor. I stayed hidden. I knew that man.”

“Who — the man with father?”

“Yes.”

“Who was he? What did he want?” queried Chet, in wonder.

“I not know what he wanted of Mr. Havens;

but I know he is a bad man," declared the Indian lad with conviction.

"Hel-lo!" exclaimed Chet. "Not that man who — who burned your shack?"

"He's the man," grunted Amoshee. "I shall get square with him."

"But what did he want of father?"

"I not know. He has been around that old mine I showed you. He dug hole into old tunnel. He want something," said Amoshee shortly.

"Say! can he be the fellow who is after the old Crayton diggings?"

"He after you," said the Indian.

"What do you mean, John?" cried Chet. "He's not following us?"

"He's on this trail before now. Going to Grub Stake. I heard him talk to big man that work in mine — get kicked out — quick! You know?" Amoshee said excitedly.

Chet seemed preternaturally sharp at the moment.

"You don't mean Tony Traddles? The man who was discharged for the trouble in our mine?"

"That's he — Tony," Amoshee assured him. "I heard him spoken to. I followed that man from

158 The Trail Boys of the Plains

Mr. Havens' house. I heard them say they take this trail. You better look out for them. That man mad as he can be."

"My goodness! what can they want of Dig and me?" queried Chet wonderingly.

"Don't know. They not friendly. That's all I can tell you. *Me* — I go hunting with these boys. I get 'em start last night instead of this morning, so we can catch you and say this. Good-bye!"

He wrung Chet's hand and leaped astride his impatient pony. The other Indians were already mounted. They all turned at a little distance and gave the Indian yell and threw up their rifles. Then they struck heels to their ponies' sides and darted away into the north.

"There goes a good bunch of fellows," Digby Fordham said, with a sigh. "I hadn't any idea Indians were such good sports."

CHAPTER XV

“WHAT WON’T BE LED MUST BE DRIVEN”

“COME along,” said Chet, after the Indians were gone. “Let’s pick up the pieces and get away. We won’t get anywhere on the trail to-day. But there’s one thing sure — we won’t stop at noon to eat.”

“Whew! I lose that meal, do I?” grumbled Dig.

“And you’ll lose supper, too, if we don’t shoot some game. Our guests pretty nearly ate us out of house and home. I calculated on your appetite when I made up our list of provisions; but I didn’t calculate on a plague of locusts. Amoshee, or John Peep, and his red friends had their appetites with them, and no mistake.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” said his chum, with sarcasm. “We can’t starve when buffaloes roam the plains as plentifully as they do. We’ll soon be able to rope a buffalo calf, eh?”

“No, there’s no need of that,” said Chet calmly.

"We've got your maverick to feed on. When are you going to butcher him, Dig?"

"I guess not!" cried Dig indignantly. "He's a pet. See! he knows me now."

He was just then approaching the yearling to unfasten the lariat. The little brute waited, with lowered head, watching Dig with what Chet was sure was a malevolent eye.

Dig stooped to untangle the rope, turning rearward to the captured calf. As though he had been waiting for the chance, the calf blatted and charged. The impact of his forehead against the seat of Dig's pants was tremendous.

"Waugh! Take him off! Help!" roared Dig, after performing a complete somersault. Chet absolutely could not help him. The maverick leaped about his prostrate captor, stiff-legged. The rope became wound around Dig's ankle and then, when he tried to get to his feet, he could not do so.

"Stop your laughing!" he called to his chum, "and come to help a fellow. He's going to bat me again!"

"What do you want — a gun?" sputtered Chet. "That calf is just as dangerous as a tiger."

But he helped his chum out of his predicament, though continuing to make remarks regarding the maverick and its troubled owner.

"So you call this a pet, do you? I'd just as soon pet a Kansas cyclone. Whoa, boy! Easy! My goodness, Dig! he pulls like a bull elk. There's something wrong with this maverick. He's crossed with a traction engine, I know."

"Oh, you behave!" complained Digby. "Why pick upon the innocent little thing? I believe you've been tantalising him when my back was turned. That's why he acts in such an ornery fashion."

They got on their horses at length, and Dig attempted to lead his prize. Instantly the maverick set all four hoofs in the soft prairie and braced himself against the line. But Dig had his line fastened to the fork of the saddle and the yearling could not pull Poke over.

The mustang snorted and dragged the maverick over the torn sod. The latter animal could not blat, for its wind was shut off.

"Hi!" cried Chet. "You'll stretch its neck until it will look like a giraffe. Then you'll never sell it at Grub Stake for a pet or for anything else."

162 The Trail Boys of the Plains

“Get better money for it,” declared Dig grimly. “It would sell for a freak in a circus. And, by Jo! it’s got to come.”

Chet watched the tug of war for some minutes further before asking, seriously:

“You haven’t called it anything yet, have you, Dig?”

“Called it anything?” protested his chum. “I’ve called it everything I dared aloud, and a whole lot of names that don’t sound well to myself!”

“Oh, no—I mean a real name,” said Chet, chuckling. “You haven’t named it yet?”

“Haven’t had time,” returned Dig innocently enough. “I been too busy trying to make the darned thing behave.”

“Well, I’d like to suggest a name for it,” said Chet.

“Yes?” responded Dig, yanking again on the calf’s line.

“Call it Stone Fence. You can move it just as easily.”

“Waugh!” shouted Dig, as the calf hung back again and the rope became taut, burning the boy’s hand between rope and saddle. “Now you’ve said something, boy! Stone Fence let him be.”

Poke was dancing. He was no cow-pony and he objected to the dragging of the waif.

"We'll never get anywhere," said Chet impatiently. "Do something to that calf, Dig, please!"

It did seem as though after the little brute had been half choked to death he ought to be willing to trot along behind Poke; but not so. Stone Fence fell down on his knees, flopped over on his side, and allowed himself to be dragged in that position.

"Say!" gasped the sweating Dig, "he'll be worn as thin as paper if he keeps that up. By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland! I'll beat that little nuisance!"

He dismounted and cut two long willow sprouts. The maverick began to graze. Nothing seemed to disturb its appetite. In that possession it and Digby Fordham were brothers, and Chet, with gravity, pointed this fact out.

"Brothers?" sniffed Dig. "You can bet we are brothers in another way. That dogy is obstinate; but so am I. You watch me!"

He mounted into the saddle again. He stuck one willow wand into his bootleg for emergency, and then used the other to prod the maverick. The

latter didn't like this. He kept ahead of the point of the willow wand which, whenever he lagged, poked between his hind legs.

Chet almost fell out of his saddle from laughing at the performance; and Poke looked as disgusted as a mustang can look. That calf plunging along the trail just ahead of Poke's nose disgruntled the spirited horse.

Chet led the march, the maverick came next, and Dig brought up an active rear. "What won't be led must be driven," quoth Dig, now quite himself again. "All aboard for Grub Stake again, Chet, my boy."

"My goodness!" exclaimed his chum, rather exasperated. "When do you think we'll ever get there at this rate?"

They made fair time, however, considering the obstacles during a part of the afternoon. Chet galloped away off the trail at sight of a small herd of deer, and managed to get near enough to shoot a young doe. He cut its throat, and let it bleed well, and then flung it over the saddle and cantered back to the trail.

Dig was rather disappointed because he had not had any of the fun of stalking the deer. Chet

pointed out the fact that Dig had the maverick, saying:

"There is compensation in everything, my boy. You have that pet to play with; I don't own any maverick. You don't hear me kicking —"

"Oh, go on!" growled Dig.

There was one good thing about Digby Fordham: he never really held rancour; and he could take a joke as well as give one. Of course he knew that he had caught a Tartar in the yearling; but he would not give him up.

Before the afternoon was gone Stone Fence had learned that it was better to walk more or less sedately along the trail than to be poked with a sharp pole. Their pace was not rapid; but they got through the pass between the hills after a time.

It was just before they left the pass and as the wider plain beyond broke upon their view that Dig spied a grey animal sitting on a rock ahead of them, and some distance off the trail.

"What do you call that, Chet?" he cried. "Looks like an old woman with a nightcap on — only she's got two tassels on the cap and they stick up straight."

"Wolf!" responded his chum, the instant he saw

the grey figure on the rock. "And the 'old woman' is all right. Bet she's a big she-wolf with a litter somewhere near. Yes, by cracky! there they are, Dig."

"I see 'em," Dig returned.

There were several moving figures beside the big old wolf sitting on her haunches. Dig was anxious to try and get a shot.

"No more chance of hitting her than of hitting the moon," returned Chet, restraining him. "But I'll tell you something right now."

"What's that?"

"You keep this blamed calf tagging us around for long, and we'll have a whole pack of wolves ringing our camp. Make up your mind to that, boy."

"'Tagging us around'? That sounds good," snorted Dig. "Get up there, you pest! I've driven this pesky creature almost far enough now."

"Turn him loose then."

"Oh, no! I couldn't be so cruel. Not with those wolves in sight," said Dig, shaking his head.

"Make up your mind that he is going to attract night prowlers."

"Good! I want to get a shot at something besides grouse."

"Never mind. Deer liver for supper to-night," said Chet.

"And the tongue. That's a fat doe; there'll be plenty of kidney suet to fry the meat in. Whew! I'm hungry now," cried Digby.

"Never saw such a disgracefully hungry person in my life," declared his chum. "Always thinking of your stomach."

They did not see the wolves again as they came out upon the edge of the great prairie. Indeed, they saw no animal. The prairie rolled away before them as far as they could see. To the north and to the south were lines of hills; but a haze almost hid the higher Rockies toward which they were bound.

Chet stopped at a stream and they filled their canteens.

"Try to be careful with it," he advised Digby. "We're not sure that we shall reach another stream to camp beside. I'm not so sure of the trail from here on, anyway."

"I'll get a good drink right here, then," said his chum, climbing carefully down.

With the maverick to take care of he had to be cautious as to his movements. It was not safe to

leave the lead-rope tied to the fork of his saddle, for if the calf pulled when the saddle was empty, Poke immediately backed around preparatory to throwing his heels at the blatting young calf.

Now Dig kneeled down at the edge of the stream above where the horses were drinking. Stone Fence had dropped down on the grass, chewing a cud, but evidently tired. The run had been a hard one for him.

Poke lifted his head, "blew" softly, and felt the tug of the leash at his saddle. The black's wicked ears shot backward and he turned his head to mark the place where Stone Fence contentedly chewed his cud.

"Look out, Dig!" cried Chet, who was just raising himself into his own saddle.

But his chum's head was down for another drink. He did not hear.

The maverick scrambled up with a snort of fright as the black horse whirled upon him. Dig tried to get up just as quickly; but when he put his weight upon a turf at the brink of the stream, the sod broke away and down he plunged, with his right arm into the water to his arm-pit.

“Oh — ouch!” gurgled Dig. “What’s the matter now?”

“Trouble!” called Chet.

But, as Dig claimed afterward, that was no fit warning. He didn’t know whether he was being attacked from behind, before, on either flank, from the sky above, or whether trouble was rising out of the ground.

And it seemed as though it had come from all points when it reached him. Dig was trying to rise when the calf, escaping Poke’s vicious hoofs, collided with his young master. Ker-splash! they were both in the stream!

The calf was scared fully as much as Dig, if not more. Both bawled and splashed about, unable to obtain their footing at first, and had Chet not dismounted and run to the assistance of the pair, one or the other might have remained under water longer than would have been good for him.

The rope had become wound about Dig’s legs in some mysterious way, and the calf was tangled up in a regular “cat’s cradle.”

“I declare!” said Chet Havens, with disgust as well as laughter. “I never saw anybody do so

much and to so little purpose with a rope in all my life. For goodness' sake, Dig! come out of that water. You're a sight!"

"I — I don't f-feel much b-b-better than I — I look," chattered his chum. "That water's cold, lemme t-tell you."

"I know it's wet — from just looking at you," proclaimed young Havens. "You're in fine shape for riding. What are you going to do with that blamed calf now?"

"Take him to Grub Stake," said Dig obstinately. "You can ride on without me, if you want to, Chet. But Stone Fence is going to be my companion if I spend the rest of the summer on the trail."

He would not remount then, however, but made Poke trail on behind him while he urged the complaining Stone Fence with a willow wand. Besides, the sun would dry his garments better when he walked, and the exercise kept him from becoming chilled.

"Gee! Haw!" he was soon calling to the yearling, teaching him to turn from side to side as the case might be. "Never too young to learn," Dig confided to his chum. "Mebbe somebody will want to work him with a bull-team."

Chet rode ahead and scanned the prairie carefully. The trail they were supposed to follow was only a faint trace now. He knew the general direction to go, and he carried a compass. He did not think he could get lost; but he was watching the plain for signs of a water-hole. The sun was descending, and they must camp before dark.

Besides, Chet was looking for signs of disturbing animals now. Having seen the old she-wolf and her young, he expected to find other — and perhaps more dangerous — creatures on the plain.

An hour later he spied some low shrubs which seemed to follow a watercourse between two coulies. The shrubs were green and thrifty, although they did not mark a very extensive stream. It might be merely a water-hole which had not yet dried up. However, Chet was quite sure it would afford the party all the water they needed for one night.

So he led the way off the trail. Even Stone Fence seemed to know that the day’s journey was nearly over. He trotted on more placidly, and the horses quickened their pace.

They had made but small progress that day. However, with all the set-backs and delays it was fortunate that they had come this far.

The water was a narrow stream trickling between willows and other moisture-loving shrubs. They made camp and started a fire very quickly. They cut up the doe Chet had shot and all the dainty parts that Dig clamoured for were prepared for the skillet, while the flayed haunches and shoulders were hung high in the saplings, out of the way (as the boys thought) of any marauding beast.

"Tell you what," Chet said, "if your calf doesn't draw the wolves down here, the smell of that fresh venison will do the trick. Watch and watch to-night, boy."

"Oh, Chet! what's the use? I'm tired," yawned his chum.

"I should think you would be paddling on after that fool calf! But expect no sympathy from me," and Chet insisted upon tethering the horses near the camp instead of letting them roam, hobbled.

"By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland!" Dig exclaimed, "why don't you build a stockade and build a big bonfire? One would think you were expecting a whole drove of savage beasts down here."

Just then a mournful wail came down the wind

— a shuddering cry that made Dig start and hold suspended the piece of meat he had upon his fork.

"Wha — what's that? A coyote?" demanded Dig.

"That's one of your friends," said Chet grimly. "It's the call of a hungry wolf. You can expect him and his gang early."

Stone Fence bawled where he was tethered nearby, instinctively knowing that there was danger near.

CHAPTER XVI

THE WOLF RING

THE howling of the lone wolf, however, did not take the boys' appetites away. Fresh venison is rather tough until it has hung awhile; but the parts of the kill Chet and Dig ate that night were tender and succulent. The steaks they would not try until the next day.

"There's a whole lot more than we can eat ourselves," said Chet. "But some other party may come along and be glad of a haunch."

"Ugh!" grunted Dig. "There's that party talking up in the hills. He'll be around for his share," as the long-drawn wail of the wolf shuddered again across the gathering night.

The cry of the wolf made the horses nervous, too; they kept stepping around instead of grazing at the end of their tethers. As for the yearling, he tried to answer bawl for bawl — and so led the wolf on.

"I never did realise before how big a fool a calf

can be," said Dig, reviewing his strenuous day.

"But say! let's smoke one of the hams."

"How?" demanded Chet.

"Hang it over the fire, of course," returned the sanguine Digby.

"And who's going to find the proper kind of wood to smoke it without merely blackening the meat with soot? And who's going to sit up all night and watch the fire? Besides, it would take three or four nights to smoke a ham properly. I hope we'll shoot other game before we get to Grub Stake."

"Oh, well, I only threw it out as a hint," sighed Dig. "Nothing I say goes."

"Not even your maverick, eh?" chuckled Chet.

They cleared up after supper and then Chet advised Dig to get into his blanket and get two hours' sleep.

"Don't believe that wolf will be down here," Dig mumbled. "No need to keep wa-wa-watch — Waugh!" and he stretched his jaws in a mighty gape.

"All right," returned Chet. "You're welcome to your belief. But I'll keep first watch, and if I hear nothing alarming, I won't wake you up."

He was satisfied at first to go to the horses and see that they were picketed all right. He did not want either of them to get entangled in the rope and so get a burn. For that might lame them, and a lame horse on the trail is no happy chance.

The howling of the wolf up in the hill made the horses restless; but the maverick finally got tired and lay down again. Chet returned to the fire. His chum was already breathing heavily. The activities of the day had tired him out. Dig wasn't exactly "soft," but he was not innured to an out-of-door life as Chet was. Besides, he had several pounds of superfluous flesh to carry around.

His sleep was healthful, however; in the flickering firelight his bronzed face was calm.

"Good old scout!" thought Chet, watching him. "And heaps of fun! But he's as obstinate as a toad — one of those whom he says were chased out of Ireland! I don't know what I'd do without Dig."

The evening had shut down now, damp and still. Frogs complained somewhere along the edge of the narrow stream. Sleepy birds croaked now and then. Night insects sang.

Then came the long, haunting howl of the wolf

from the heights. Every other sound seemed to hush while the howl endured.

A reply came from far out on the prairie; then a third wolf took up the cry from another direction. The pack was gathering.

Chet drew his heavy rifle closer and examined the hammer. It was well greased and the mechanism was working perfectly. But he put the rifle aside. He was not going to waste expensive ammunition on such useless creatures as wolves — if he could help it.

It was on his pistol that he depended to drive off marauders. He spun the cylinder and then tucked in the sixth cartridge. It was fully loaded now and he laid the gun down upon his dry blanket. It was as dangerous as a loaded bomb, for the plainsman never carried a gun fully loaded unless in time of stress or peril.

The horses stamped, and Poke nickered. But Dig slept on. His chum got up, pistol in hand, and slowly patrolled the camp again. Of course the wolves were not near as yet; nor were they giving tongue.

Chet had had some experience on the trail; and he had listened to many stories related by old plains-

men, but he did not know much about wolves, after all. He expected the pack to try to rush the camp, and to come up yelling like a band of wild Indians.

When the animals, which seemed to be gathering from all sides of the camp, ceased howling, he was puzzled. He wondered what had become of the wolves. Perhaps they had gone off on some other scent. Perhaps they had crossed the track of a deer and it had drawn them away from the camp.

The horses were still uneasy, and now Stone Fence scrambled up and leaped at the end of his rope, bawling pitifully. Something near at hand disturbed the animals, whose instinct and sense of smell were far superior to the boy's sight and hearing.

Chet could see nothing; nor could he hear anything. Yet the restlessness of the horses and the calf kept him alert. He went around the camp again, and afterwards replenished the fire. He wished he had prepared more fuel. It was warm and they did not really need the fire; but at night a blaze in the open is company.

He went to Hero and quieted him, petting him and talking to him. Poke still stamped. Out on

the open prairie, beyond the fringe of willows, Chet thought he saw something moving. He was tempted to send a shot in that direction.

“But that will wake Dig. And it’s only nervousness,” thought the boy. “Huh! I must be afraid of the dark.”

He went back to the fire and sat down. There was the bole of a small tree at his back. The position was tempting.

But the restlessness of the yearling precluded sleep. The little beast strained at the end of its tether, headed toward the fire, and blatted plaintively.

“My goodness! but you are a scared calf,” Chet muttered, rising again.

And then, just over the line of the calf’s straining back, he saw the gleam of two eyes in the edge of the thicket.

Chet Havens sprang up on the instant, and as he sprang he fired. He didn’t have to aim, for those eyes looked as big as saucers to him!

There was a shrill howl from the stricken beast. Chet’s ball had punctured its breast as it threw up its head. Answering howls came from all about the camp. It was ringed with the savage brutes

that had gathered silently in expectation of the killing.

The pistol shot, the wolf's howl, and the maverick's bawling awoke Dig. He scrambled up, confused and dreaming.

"Don't kill him! don't kill him, Chet!" he begged. "The poor thing hasn't bucked *you* into the brook."

"You bet I killed him," returned his chum, and the next instant fired again.

"But, Chet," squealed his chum. "You don't need to shoot him after he's dead. Save your powder and lead —"

"Whew! what's happened? Stone Fence seems to be all right."

"And if I hadn't shot Mr. Wolf just in the nick of time, Stone Fence would have been slaughtered to make a lupine holiday," chuckled Chet. "They've run, the cowardly scoundrels."

"Thought you said they weren't cowards?" yawned Dig.

"They're not hungry enough to be brave yet. In the dead of winter, however, they'd have come right in to the fire and fought for the calf. Shorten the tether on him, Dig. And I'll bring the horses

nearer. I don't like these beasts. They sneak in too close for comfort."

"Say! you've waked me up now," grumbled Dig. "Might as well stay awake. I'll keep watch. What time is it?"

"Wake me at midnight," Chet said, not at all loath to give his partner a bit of work.

He rolled up in his blanket; but he did not sleep at first, although he closed his eyes. Dig did not make any particular noise, but he kept stirring around the camp. The horses and the yearling remained quiet for a long time.

Dig was getting tired of his vigil. He slumped down with his back to the same tree against which Chet had rested. Then — one, two, three, and he was off! A long snore, and he was in the Land of Nod.

Save for the boys' breathing the camp was still. Stone Fence probably dozed as he lay at the end of his tether. The horses were grazing again.

But if nothing else, the smell of their brother's blood would have brought the wolves back. They skulked along the watercourse and at the edge of the thicket. The flickering firelight did not frighten them.

They gave the horses a wide berth, for they feared their heels. The yearling was lying within the radiance of the firelight. The wolves surrounded the camp once more; but they drew near only at one point.

The beasts are not averse to licking the bones of their own kind. The dead wolf, that Chet had shot, drew them. And nearby hung the venison in the tops of the saplings.

Silently at first; then with muffled growls and the snapping of slavering jaws, the wolves fought over their comrade. There were a dozen and more of them. The horses moved uneasily, and the yearling struggled up again; but the boys slept.

One lank and hungry brute smelled the hanging deer flesh and slunk away to the spot. He leaped for it — again and yet again.

Chet had no idea how high a wolf could jump. He thought he had hung the meat out of reach of every marauder; but Mr. Wolf did not think so.

The horses and Stone Fence became quiet again. The chums sunk together into a deeper sleep. The fire burned down to mere embers.

Perhaps something occurred to make the wolves beat a silent retreat; at least, they left the vicinity

of the encampment without raising another alarm. If the horses were now and then uneasy, their stamping did not awake Chet and Dig.

The day's activities had exhausted the chums. Once asleep, Chet slept as heavily as Digby. Nothing occurred to arouse them until daybreak; then Chet awoke suddenly, sat up, threw off his blanket, and looked about in surprise.

"Say, you sleepy-headed coot!" he roared, flinging an empty milk-can at the still sleeping Dig. "What d'ye mean — sleeping like this? You never woke me up."

"Ugh! Huh?" demanded Dig. "You ought to thank me for that, then."

"You'd make a nice soldier!"

"Never claimed to be a soldier, and didn't expect to go soldiering when I came out on the trail with you," declared Dig belligerently. "I guess you'll find everything all right. And you slept just as hard as I did."

"Sha'n't trust you to keep watch again," said Chet.

"Well, that's a good thing! By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland! I don't want to keep watch."

But Chet was serious. He saw that the horses and the calf were safe. But when he went into the thicket, he saw that the dead wolf had been dragged away to a distance and there torn to bits. Only red bones and bits of fur remained.

Then he remembered the haunches of venison left hanging to cool. He ran to the spot. Only a single ham hung in the top of a sapling. The others had been torn down. The tops of the saplings were broken, supposedly by the wolves as they leaped for the meat.

At Chet's first cry Dig came running.

"Now you can see what was done while you slept," said young Havens, with disgust.

"Whew! The miserable, thieving beasts!" burst out Dig. "Wish I'd caught 'em at it —"

"You were snoozing your head off," was his chum's accusation. "That's when this happened."

He suddenly became silent, however. He bent over and examined the disturbed ground underneath the spot where the lost meat had hung. Then he glanced keenly all about.

"Hold on, Dig," he said softly, waving his chum back. "Don't step in any nearer."

"What's the matter?" queried his surprised

friend. "See a wolf print that you know? An old friend, for instance?"

"Wait," begged Chet again. "I see something besides wolf-paw prints."

"What, for goodness' sake?" demanded the other, startled.

"The print of boots — men's boots."

"Get out!"

"I tell you at least one man has been here."

"Pshaw! our own footprints! You gave me a scare, Chet."

"No," Chet said earnestly. "I see our marks. But a person with a much bigger foot has been here. See that? and that? Some stranger. I — I'm not sure that we have been robbed by wolves, after all, Dig."

"By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland!" gasped the other boy. "What do you mean? Who could have robbed us? I don't understand, Chet."

"Neither do I," returned young Havens. "Don't come this way and foul the marks any more. Let's see where this fellow came from, and where he went to."

CHAPTER XVII

A MYSTERY

CHET HAVENS had been an apt pupil of old Rafe Peters, the hunter who was now mine foreman at the Silent Sue; nor had he missed much that had been told him by other plainsmen. Trailing and hunting was a hobby with the boy, and each vacation for several years past he had spent the most of his time on hunting trips.

With Digby Fordham he had taken many short trips around Silver Run; but they had seldom encountered big game or gone many miles from their home. This trip to Grub Stake was by far the longest the chums had ever taken alone.

It was Chet's trained eye that discovered the fact that a marauder other than the wolves had been at their camp. Had it been left to Dig, who was not observant, the presence of any other enemy than that which had annoyed them in the evening probably would never have been discovered.

"Could it have been those Indians, Chet?" asked Dig, as his chum bent to examine the ground closely.

"What Indians?"

"John Peep's dog soldiers."

"Nonsense! Those boys wouldn't play us such a trick. Nor did they follow us."

"Huh! Didn't know that anybody else was following us," said Dig.

"Perhaps this fellow wasn't on our trail. Maybe he stumbled on this camp. The fire — or the wolves themselves — might have drawn him."

Chet was thinking hard, however. At once, when he had discovered the footprint which proclaimed a white marauder, he remembered what Amoshee, the lame Cheyenne boy, had told him.

There was a strange man who was interested in the old Crayton mine and therefore was interested in this trip to Grub Stake. This stranger had joined forces with the discharged Tony Traddles. Chet had heard Tony himself threaten Mr. Havens and declare he would "get square" with his former employer.

Chet looked at the print of the large boot in the soft soil. Tony Traddles might stand in boots like that. And if Tony was here, the man who was trying to get hold of the old Crayton mine was very likely here, too.

188 The Trail Boys of the Plains

The condition looked serious to Chet Havens. He did not want to say anything yet to his chum; but he did propose to keep a sharp watch thereafter.

He was desirous, too, of learning all he could about the midnight marauder. If the mysterious person had stolen only some of the deer meat, why had he taken it?

And if he had come as near the camp as this, why hadn't he come nearer?

"With both of us sound asleep," thought Chet, with disgust, "they might have come in and taken anything they liked. It puzzles me!"

He placed his hand upon the bosom of his shirt and could feel the stiff packet of papers he carried in its accustomed place. His apprehension was immediately relieved.

"Pshaw!" Chet muttered. "This might not have been Tony or that other fellow at all. Just some tramp or the like on the trail, who was attracted to our camp. Probably needed meat and helped himself.

"But it was funny he didn't wait till daylight and come and ask for it."

While he was turning these thoughts over in his

mind he was moving through the thicket, turning aside bushes, looking under bunches of grass, peering here and there, to trace the tracks of the stranger.

And they were easy to follow—even for a youthful trailer like Chet Havens. A spoor made in the night must be less carefully laid down than a track by daylight. Not much chance to hide footprints while stumbling through the dark.

Chet saw how the stranger had come into the thicket, and how he had left. He had not gone near the camp and the place where the sleeping boys lay. Chet was so sure of this that he did not attempt to examine very closely the camp itself.

He was sure, however, the marauder had robbed them of the bulk of their meat. The in trace and the out trace led directly up the slope from the brook beside which they were encamped, to the trail they were following to Grub Stake.

There, as near as Chet could make out, two horses had stood. He could not discover, the sod was so cut up, whether both, or only one, of the riders had dismounted.

He could picture the possible happening, however. In the night the two riders had come along from

the east. They were following the trail in the same direction as the boys.

Hearing the noise made by the wolves over their dead brother, the strange trailers stopped, and one of them had gone down to investigate. The wolves had been frightened away by the coming of this person.

The stranger must have found the camp, but had circled about it — as his footprints showed. Finding the meat, he had helped himself and returned to the trail, then he and his partner had ridden on.

“The mystery of it is,” said Chet to his chum, when he returned to the camp to find breakfast started, “why the fellow robbed us of meat and didn’t try to take anything more valuable. I hope you see the value of keeping watch now, Dig?”

“Yes, I do!” agreed his chum, with more seriousness than he usually displayed. “I’ll take my medicine for that break last night, old man. If I had kept my watch and waked you, nobody would have sneaked up on our camp and stolen our meat.”

“Glad they left us this piece,” Chet said, slicing off steaks with his hunting knife.

They seasoned the meat highly and rubbed tallow on both sides. Then they broiled the steaks over

the clear fire on one of the "contraptions" which Dig had laughed at his chum for packing. They had coffee; but the pancake flour was gone, and there were only a few "hard-breads."

Hearty boys, however, do not need tempting dishes for breakfast. There was still milk for the coffee, and as Dig said, they fairly "wolfed" the venison steaks. The sun was not an hour high when they abandoned the camping place and started for the trail.

Chet was particularly eager to reach the trail, for he wished to follow the trace of the strangers who had robbed them; and when he saw Dig fussing with Stone Fence, he exclaimed:

"For pity's sake! don't delay us to-day by fooling with that calf, Dig. Do be reasonable."

"What do you think he is — a race horse?" demanded the other boy, in feigned amazement. "Can't expect him to trot like Maud S., or Yellow-dock. You surprise me!"

"I'll surprise you if I ride off on Hero and leave you and your plaguey calf to bring up the rear," threatened Chet.

"You couldn't be so heartless," declared Dig. "I know you couldn't. We have been in peril to-

gether — Stone Fence and I. We came pretty near being drowned, and then, there were the wolves. I feel toward him just like a brother — Get out, you beast! want to butt me over again?”

They got under way and Chet set as brisk a pace as possible. He did not want to leave his chum and the maverick behind; yet he was a little vexed at Dig for being so obstinate.

The morning was delightful, however; nobody could hold anger at such an hour. The boys whistled and sang and skylarked; the horses snorted and stepped “high, wide and handsome,” as Dig called it; and even Stone Fence trotted along the trail without much urging.

They had not to be on the watch for game this day, for they had enough of the deer meat left to last them until over breakfast the following morning. Yet Chet’s glance was ever roving over the plain as they went on. No trace of the venison thieves was to be found.

The hills were behind them; the mountains were so far in advance that a blue haze masked them. Nearby groves of small trees marked water-holes; but there was no stream in sight.

“Plain” did not mean in this case a perfectly



They fairly “wolfed” the venison steaks

flat surface. There were coulies to break the monotony of the level trail, or ancient watercourses to descend into and climb out of. Once they came to the edge of a steep sand-bluff, after having ridden up a gradual ascent to this eminence. From the spot they could see vastly farther than before.

It was from here that Chet spied something far to the north that interested him. He carried a pair of field-glasses in a case slung from one shoulder. He opened these and focused them on the round, black objects that had attracted his attention.

With the naked eye they looked like beehives, and they did not seem to move. But through the glass they were not conical, and they were traveling toward the northeast. They all moved together, but slowly; there could be no doubt of that.

"What's got you now?" demanded Dig, finally noticing that his chum was fixed in one position for a long time.

"Look here," Chet said, offering him the glasses.

"Well, look out for Stone Fence," returned Dig, and urged Poke nearer to the bay mount, while he reached for the glasses.

"Fix them on those dots over yonder," advised Chet. "Now, look good."

Dig did so. In a minute he exclaimed:

“Cattle grazing!”

“Think so?”

“Sure. Maybe Stone Fence belongs to that herd.”

“But to whom does the herd belong?” demanded Chet. “We know well enough that there is no ranch nearer than the Ogallala. Those are not strays from the cattle trail. Weak and crippled cattle that are abandoned on the march fall an easy prey to wolves and lions.”

“What do you make of it, then?” demanded Dig.

“Look at the round backs of them; the size of them, too. No cattle that I ever saw are built like those. They certainly are not Texans or the sun would flash on their horns now and then when they toss their heads. It doesn’t look as though those creatures have any horns.”

“Oh, say!” cried Dig. “That’s going too far! We couldn’t see their horns from here, if they had ’em a mile wide!”

“That’s stretching it some,” said Chet, laughing and reaching for the glasses again.

“But what do you really think they are?” demanded Dig, growing more and more excited.

"Going to find out," announced Chet.

"Oh, goodness, Chet! You don't think —"

"I'm going to find out what they are," repeated the other lad firmly.

"By *all* the hoptoads that were chased out of Ireland! you don't mean to say that you think those are buffaloes? Oh, Chet!"

"I certainly don't think they are hoptoads," grinned his chum. "I'm not sure what they are, but I'm going to find out." He slipped out of the saddle, to ease it on Hero's back and then cinch it up for a hard ride.

"Whew! you're not going to leave me alone?" gasped Dig. "Why, it's miles and miles over yonder."

"Come on, then."

"But what'll I do with Stone Fence?" blurted out Dig.

"Say, boy!" said Chet shortly, "this is the parting of the ways for you and that red dogy. You've had your fun. Now this is business."

"Have I got to decide between a perfectly good yearling calf and a possible buffalo? Seems a hard case," groaned Dig. "I bet I could sell him for five dollars."

"We've got to turn back a little on our trail to follow those beasts yonder," Chet said. "It's likely we'll hit the trail again about here. Turn Stone Fence loose down in this sandy bottom. There's enough grass to feed him a year and I see a trickle of water yonder. He'll be all right. If he's learned to love you, Dig, he'll be waiting for you when we return."

"I'll do just that," cried Dig eagerly, and he urged the obstinate maverick down the slope.

He was back in ten minutes after abandoning the surprised calf at the foot of the bluff. The creature gazed after his human companions and the horses with plain surprise in his bovine countenance.

Finally, as Dig and the black horse surmounted the rise, Stone Fence spread all four of his legs and blatted after him like a cosset calf.

"What do you know about that? I hate to leave him in the lurch," declared Dig. "Some beast'll get him, sure as shooting, Chet."

"He was exempt from trouble long before you met him, Dig," said Chet, smiling. "I'm not sure that he considers you, even yet, his guardian angel."

They rearranged their outfit, tightened cinches, and remounted. The black specks were quite visi-

ble to the naked eye; but they were moving slowly northeast. The boys shook the reins and let Hero and Poke point into the wind at an easy canter.

CHAPTER XVIII

ROYAL GAME

CHET was just as eager and excited as he could be. Dig appeared to be doubtful of the identity of the moving herd they had spied so far away; nevertheless, he felt that the venture was momentous.

The chums had not hunted big game frequently enough to approach this strange herd of grazing animals with calmness. Their pulses throbbed and their faces flushed. They were both on the qui vive.

"If it should be the buffaloes, Chet," gasped Digby Fordham, "what'll we do?"

"Shake salt on their tails," grinned Chet, "as you suggested doing to the antelope."

"No fooling," Dig urged. "They'll be dangerous, won't they?"

"If we get them mad, I reckon they will be. But they are very timid at the approach of man. And if they get started on the run — good-bye! We couldn't catch them unless our horses were very fresh. That's why we must take the trip over to

their feeding ground easily. We may have to gallop to get a shot."

"If they are the buffaloes," added the Doubting Thomas.

"If they are not the buffaloes, they'll be something well worth shooting," Chet said with confidence. "I don't know of anything else that size that roams these plains."

They had ridden several miles off the trail now, and the humped backs of the grazing animals were quite plainly visible.

"Suppose they see us?" suggested Dig suddenly.

"From what I've heard about the buffaloes, there's not much danger. You see, they are headed away from us and are grazing. When their heads are down they can't see much going on right about them, and nothing at all at a distance. A buffalo herd sets no sentinels as do elk or wild horses."

"But if they get a scent of us?"

"Wind's from them. It's blowing in our faces, isn't it? Just the same, we'll creep up on them like a cat on a mouse," Chet agreed. "After a while, we'll keep to the coulies and gullies, and go at a slower pace. This is a great chance, Dig. If we each brought home a buffalo robe — eh?"

"Whew!" breathed Dig exultantly.

"Or shot the big fellow they say captains this herd?" went on Chet.

"Oh, come on!" exclaimed Dig. "You make my mouth water."

They had stopped for no midday meal; nor did Dig complain of this loss. Not at present, at least. He was quite as much worked up over the hunt as his chum.

"Just think of it," Chet said, after a time, "I was reading a book the other evening that quoted 'Fremont, the Pathfinder' as saying that in 1836 one travelling from the Rockies to the Missouri River never lost sight of grazing buffaloes."

"Whew!"

"The old emigrant trails were marked for years and years by the whitened skulls of buffaloes, wantonly killed by the travellers. Everybody who came West wanted to say that he had shot a buffalo. Why, Dig! they used to roam all this great United States from the Pacific Slope to Lake Champlain. The last buffalo was killed east of the Mississippi River in 1832."

"And now it's hard to find any of 'em," said Dig. "Where have they gone?"

“Indiscriminate killing,” replied Chet. “So the books say. Yet in 1859 some people estimated that there were more buffaloes grazing these ranges than there were cattle in the whole country.

“Of course, the Indians slaughtered many of them. They were the only beef the redmen had. The prairie Indians — the Comanches, Sioux and Pawnees — just about lived on buffalo meat all the year around. And their skins covered their winter teepees, clothed them in cold weather, and otherwise were made useful. Their hoofs made glue and their tendons were used by the squaws to sew with. Yes indeed! a buffalo was a mighty useful animal to a redskin.”

“Well,” sighed Dig, “a buffalo is going to be a mighty useful animal to you and me, Chet — if we shoot one. Why, say! there won’t be another fellow in Silver Run who can show a buffalo head for a trophy.”

“Well,” Chet said, “if you propose to cart head and all back to town you’ll have some contract, boy. I believe the head of a bull buffalo will weigh almost as much as the rest of his body.”

“Whew!”

“That’s what makes of him such a good batter-

ing-ram. They say a blow from the head of a two-months calf will knock a man over. Suppose Stone Fence had been a buffalo calf. When he rammed you into that creek you'd have been drowned."

"Huh! That's straining a point," replied Dig. "You can bet I'm not going to get in front of any of the creatures."

"And that's where you'll be wise. Especially if you want to shoot one," Chet observed. "You might pump every ball in your rifle at the front of an old bull, and he'd only shake his head and whisk his tail like a horse bit by a fly. A bullet won't bring down a bull, unless you are too close for comfort. Behind the foreleg is the place to aim at."

"Very well, Davy Crockett," returned Dig. "I have taken your advice to heart."

Nevertheless, Digby admired his chum greatly because of Chet's wider reading and better memory for practical things. Of course, Chet had been reading up on buffaloes ever since Rafe Peters and Tony Traddles reported seeing the stray herd near the Grub Stake trail.

"Though I never expected that we'd sight them," admitted Dig. "Whew! Suppose we do bag one of them, old man?"

“That’s what we’re out here for,” his chum said.
 “Wait now till I spy out the land again.”

He stood up in his stirrups and looked through the field-glasses. The focus of the instrument brought the group of feeding buffaloes very near. Chet counted them twice to make sure.

“Sixteen, Dig!” he said, under his breath. “My goodness, boy! Wait till we get up to them.”

“Do you see the big fellow? Or was that a yarn of Tony’s? I wouldn’t believe that fellow on a stack of Bibles as high as the moon.”

“Rafe saw the big bull, too. Goodness! there he is!”

“Where?” asked Dig, looking around, startled, as though expecting to see the buffalo right at hand.

“He’s been feeding off by himself. He is coming from behind that clump of shrubs. Look at the monster, Dig!”

He handed the glasses quickly to his chum. The latter focused them and almost immediately uttered his favourite ejaculation:

“By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland! That’s an elephant — not a buffalo, Chet.”

“Aren’t you glad you brought that heavy rifle, old man?”

"I wish it were a cannon," admitted Dig, in amazement at the size of the big buffalo.

He was grazing with his side toward the approaching hunters, and for several minutes Chet and Dig both gazed upon him through the glasses. His hump was enormous, and so shaggy that he looked as big as an overland freight wagon, painted black.

Of course, close to, the buffalo would have been found to be brown — of various shades. The mane is the darker — sometimes almost black, in fact. The bull is much darker than the cow.

The great shoulders, neck and head, covered with thick, matted hair to the eyes, make a threatening front for any unsophisticated hunter to face. Dig admitted his distaste for the prospect.

"I'll take your word for it, old man," he said to his chum. "If I get a shot you can bet it will be from the side. I don't want that battering-ram headed for me when I fire. I certainly should have what old Rafe calls elk fever."

"Stage fright, I reckon!" agreed his chum.

"But say!" Dig asked, "where are his horns? I don't see any."

"And you'll not till you're on top of him," Chet

replied. "The horns are no bigger than a two year old steer's. But he can bunt with 'em."

"Aren't you right! Whew! let's be careful how we approach those creatures."

"We will be just that," agreed Chet. "Now come on, boy; give me the glasses. See that everything is all right; don't let any of the tinware joggle. Is your rifle all right? Button your revolver tight in the holster. A six-shooter won't do you any more good than a pea-shooter with those shaggy fellows. This old rifle of father's is the boy to depend on."

"I'm ready," said Dig, and they let the impatient horses go again.

They rode on sod, and that silenced the hoofbeats to a degree. When they were all of two miles from the buffalo herd they pulled in and only walked their mounts. And they did not see the buffaloes again for nearly an hour, for they kept to the low places in the plain.

At last Chet left his horse in Dig's care and reconnoitred by creeping up the side of a coulie on hands and knees. When he saw the first buffalo he ducked quickly, fearful that he had been seen. It was a young bull, not more than half grown; but

it looked larger than any horse Chet had ever seen.

He could have made a clean shot at that animal; but Chet had not brought his gun with him. He had not expected to find any of the herd so near. Nor were there any others at this spot.

The remaining fifteen, including the big bison, were out of rifle-shot from this point. And just as Chet spied the land out, the young bull lifted his head, twirled his tail, and started off on an easy trot for the rest of his tribe.

He had not been startled. It was merely that he had chanced to discover he was alone and the sense of fear, more than any other sense, keeps all of the bovine clans in herd. They are not naturally gregarious.

Chet peeped and peered after the trotting buffalo until he reached his clan. The herd was not disturbed. All went on feeding peacefully. It would have been too bad to shoot at that single bull and so startle the entire herd.

But they were feeding a good ways out on the open and unbroken plain. Chet scanned it carefully. There really did not seem to be a bit of screen on this side behind which they might creep up on the buffaloes.

The gentle wind blew towards him. He knew better than to try to approach the herd with the wind. But how meet the emergency?

Chet Havens was not a practical hunter; but he was theoretically a good one, for he had a good memory and was a good shot. The mere ability to shoot true is not the only quality necessary to make a good sportsman. The boy realised his shortcomings.

He had never been placed in such a situation as this alone before. Always he and Dig had had an experienced hunter with them when they stalked deer. Here was a case where the boy had to decide what to do on his own initiative.

His father and Mr. Fordham had praised his resourcefulness when he had made the successful attempt to get at the men entombed in the Silent Sue mine. This was another chance for him to prove that they had not been mistaken in him.

Chet Havens glanced again at the peacefully feeding buffaloes, fully a quarter of a mile away; then he looked down into the hollow where the two horses grazed and Dig awaited him. An idea was born in the boy's mind.

CHAPTER XIX

A FRUITLESS CHASE

CHET slipped down from the summit of the rise, motioning to his chum to keep still. For, although the buffaloes were grazing so far away, he feared that a loud word spoken might startle them.

"Have they skedaddled, Chet?" Dig finally whispered when his chum came near.

"No."

"I was afraid that they might have done so. Any chance for a shot?"

"I believe so. I'll tell you my plan," Chet returned in a low voice.

Dig was just as eager now as Chet himself to get a shot at the game. Chet explained quietly how the herd was grazing and what he proposed to do to overcome the lack of shelter from the down wind side.

Dig dismounted and they led the horses up the rise. They had some small discussion as to whether they should abandon the outfit while they stalked the buffaloes.

"You know what Poke will do the minute I take

his saddle off. He'll roll," said Dig, with disgust. "And the way he kicks and snorts is enough to frighten any kind of game into a conniption fit."

"I don't think, after all, that the saddles and blanket-rolls will make the buffaloes suspicious," whispered Chet. "Now lengthen your rein and tie your lariat to it. We'll give the horses all the range possible."

With the horses at the very end of the tethers the trail boys let them drift over the rise and out upon the plain. It was noon and they were hungry, so they began to graze immediately.

Whenever the buffaloes caught sight of the two horses, they were quietly feeding on the short grass, and moving on like themselves — up wind. A plains-bred or mountain-bred horse will always point into the wind when grazing, just as instinctively as any game animal.

What the buffaloes did not see was the long line dragging behind each horse. At the end of the lines were the boys, creeping on hands and knees, or lying flat for a time on the prairie, to breathe.

The horses made a perfect screen for the young hunters. Chet's plan included the stalking of the

buffaloes to within easy striking distance. Then they were to spring into the saddles, cast free the ropes, and shoot from that vantage seat — following the herd on horseback if necessary, for a second shot.

It seemed as though the plan would go through without a hitch. The horses were kept moving by the boys at the end of the ropes; but they did nothing to startle Hero and Poke.

Holding the rope in one hand, each boy dragged behind him with the other his heavy rifle. If the buffaloes glanced toward the horses they would see no farther than the saddle mounts themselves. That is the way with creatures of the wild. With all their apprehension of an approaching enemy, they are satisfied of their own safety if some other creature intervenes between them and the enemy. The quietly grazing horses made the buffaloes perfectly tranquil. The young hunters were making a successful approach.

The big leader of the herd was on the far side; but Chet Havens had his mind made up to try for that very individual. It would be a feather in his cap indeed if he brought down the big bull.

There were two calves with the buffaloes; but

they were of grazing age. Chet was quite sure that these calves would not keep the herd back much if once it should bolt.

The horses and their owners drew nearer and nearer. Chet had planned to come upon the buffaloes a little to one side instead of from the immediate rear. This was so the game would not have to swing their heads around to see the horses.

The more familiar they became with the sight of the grazing horses the less likely the herd was to stampede.

At the right hand — the southeast — was a considerable thicket. Chet had noticed this in the beginning; but he did not consider it a good vantage point from which to stalk the herd. He was aiming almost directly for it.

He would, however, have given considerable for just the protection that thicket afforded as the moment for him and Dig to mount drew near. The boys signalled each other without speaking. Chet assured Dig that he was going to try for the big bull while Dig signalled that he would be satisfied with a much smaller animal and pointed out one of the young males, nearer at hand.

Chet glanced all around to see if the way was

clear, and had just raised his hand in signal to mount, when not only the buffaloes, but the horses, evinced sudden excitement.

The whole herd stopped feeding, and the horses threw up their heads and snorted.

“That old fool, Poke!” Dig muttered. “What does he want to make that noise for?”

A long grey body shot from the thicket and crossed the plain directly ahead of the buffalo herd. It was running like the wind; indeed, it looked to be little more than a streak as it skimmed the sod.

Neither boy had ever seen a running wolf before; but they did not need to be told what this was. With terror at his tail Mr. Wolf will match anything on four legs in speed.

And something had certainly frightened this grey rascal. He had doubtless been lurking in the thicket, watching the buffalo calves and licking his chops at the sight. Something had started him for the distant Canadian border, and it looked as though he would get there presently.

The wolf ran almost against the noses of the herd. The buffaloes huddled for a moment, the big bull snorting and bellowing. Then, as one creature, they

wheeled in the track of the wolf, and set off at a lumbering canter that took them across the plain at surprising speed.

“By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland!” exclaimed Dig, in disgust. “Did you ever see such luck?”

He ran to scramble on to Poke’s back; but Chet commanded him not to follow the herd at once.

“No use adding to their fright. They may only run a few miles if they are not molested,” said Chet.

“And not a shot after all that trouble!”

Chet was staring at the thicket rather than after the stampeded buffaloes.

“What under the sun could have started that wolf like that?” he muttered.

“Come!” cried Dig excitedly from the saddle, “you’re not going to let ’em get entirely away from us, are you, Chet?”

“I don’t believe we can get near them again to-day, Dig.”

“Why not?”

“After being scared like that they will be more watchful. And it’s two o’clock now.”

“I don’t care. Why, Chet, those are real buffaloes!”

"What's the matter?" laughed his chum. "Did you think they were imitations at first?"

"Whew!" blew Dig. "I certainly believed they were an hallucination. I didn't believe there were such creatures. At least, not along this trail.

"But now I've seen 'em — and been almost near enough to 'em for a shot — I tell you right now, Chet Havens, my blood is up! Let's go after those buffaloes!"

"Even if they lead us to the Arctic Circle?" laughed Chet.

"Well, we have our camp equipment with us. Why not camp for the night where we happen to be? We can get back to the Grub Stake trail tomorrow."

"And poor little Stone Fence?" suggested Chet slyly.

"Shucks! Maybe I'll lasso one of those buffalo calves," said Dig, grinning. "It would sell for more in town."

It was agreed to pursue the buffalo herd for a way, at least. The frightened creatures had run from their feeding course. They had disappeared behind some round mounds to the northwest. This was almost as much off their trail as the buffaloes'

previous course had been. When the boys started on a heavy gallop after the game, the Grub Stake trail lay far to the south.

The distance to the mounds was not above five miles. The horses took up the trail at an easy pace and when they mounted the first small eminence the buffaloes were still out of sight.

"Whew!" exclaimed Digby. "I reckon they have run some distance, Chet."

"See that timber ahead?" replied his chum. "It's an open piece, and there is probably a stream in it, or just the other side of it. The buffaloes have gone no farther than the water, and may be feeding in the grove. If the latter, then we must approach very carefully. They can see us on the plain before we can see them in the timber."

"Now you're shouting, old boy!" cried Dig, admiringly. "Say! you're a regular plainsman."

"It stands to reason," Chet returned, "we've got to use our heads if we expect to ever shoot one of those buffaloes."

"Oh, cricky, Chet! If we only could," said Dig longingly.

"Keep your heart up. Maybe we shall," said Chet stoutly. "Now, let me tell you what I think."

"Spout, brother, spout."

"If that herd gets quiet again and goes to feeding, how will the animals head?"

Dig immediately saw what he meant, and nodded.

"Into the wind, of course," he said.

"And the breeze holds steady, and is likely to do so until sundown," Chet proceeded.

"Well?"

"What we want to do, then, is to make a circle to the west and come up behind the feeding herd, just as we did before. Let us not cross this plain to the timber. We'll keep along the line of these mounds and at their foot, and find some place to cross over to the timber and the water under shelter. Come on," and he swung Hero's head about.

"Just one minute, Chet," said his chum timidly, as he urged Poke to follow the other horse.

"What's that?"

"Don't you think we ought to eat?"

"Do you want to waste time now making camp, and cooking, and all that? Right in the middle of stalking that herd?"

"Whew! I'll have to pull in my belt a hole or two, then," grumbled Dig.

"Pull it in then. No stop until we have another

chance at the buffaloes — or until night comes and stops us,” declared his chum firmly. “We’re real hunters now. We’re not playing at it!”

For two hours they rode steadily. The two boys scarcely exchanged a word and the horses began to show weariness. Then they came up a dead gully into the edge of the very piece of timber for which they had been aiming. There was no water in sight, and both horses and riders were beginning to suffer for it. The timber seemed more extensive than had appeared from the round back of the mound across the plain. Nor, as far as the boys could see, were there any signs of the herd of buffaloes. It really seemed as though their chase had been fruitless — and the sun was fast going down.

“Whew!” said Dig, whimsically. “We’re a long way from home, Chet. What shall we do next?”

CHAPTER XX

A MIDNIGHT ALARM

As Chet surmised, the timber was open, with a good sod and little rubbish or shrubbery. None of the bushes was big enough to hide the buffaloes even at a distance.

Not an object moved under the trees as the boys pressed on their tired mounts. If the herd of buffaloes had come this way it had not stopped to graze in the shelter of the timber.

And that fact puzzled Chet Havens and caused much disappointment to his chum, Dig Fordham.

"It gets me!" grumbled the latter. "You figured the thing out all right, Chet. We sneaked around and came up behind them all according to programme. But plague it all; somebody's removed the buffaloes. They *ought* to have stopped here."

"Maybe they kept on to water," said Chet ruminatively.

"Whew! That wouldn't be a bad idea for us! Where do you suppose water is? The last drop dribbled out of my canteen two hours ago."

"Water's right under our feet, I suppose. See

how thrifty these trees are. But we can't stop to dig for it," said Chet. "We'd better let the horses find it."

"And give up hunting the buffaloes?"

"For to-night. We don't know how far away our camping place is — and night is coming fast. The horses have travelled hard."

"Right!" agreed Dig. "But I hate to give over the hunt."

"We'll see what the morning brings forth," Chet said cheerfully. "Let's give the nags a free rein. Get on, Hero!"

The bay and the black horse were both thirsty. The boys could see no stream; but their mounts unerringly knew the direction of the nearest water. Both horses were range born and had run wild as colts. The instinct of their ancestors, the pure-blooded mustangs, was strong in them.

They struck almost directly northward through the timber and came out into the darkening plain on the other side. Night was coming fast and the boys naturally grew anxious.

They were not exactly lost. Chet had his compass, and, moreover, they could tell the general direction easily enough by the setting sun. But the

Grub Stake trail was a long way behind them and all this country to the west, north, and east was entirely strange to the trail boys.

“Those buffaloes have plenty of country to hide in,” complained Dig, as the horses plodded on. “No wonder we didn’t find them. Whew! this is a big state, Chet.”

“We can pick up their trail in the morning if we want to,” returned his chum, smiling.

“How?” demanded Dig, interested.

“Why, all we need do,” Chet explained, “is to go back to those mounds, find the trail of the buffaloes, and follow it. They left a trace that a blind man could scarcely miss to the point where we turned west. It’s easy.”

“Whew!” blew Dig. “Of course! What a thickhead I am! We’ll get those buffaloes yet.”

“I don’t know,” Chet returned thoughtfully. “Ought we to go so far from the Grub Stake trail? Father did not tell me to hasten; but I am sure he expected us not to delay much on the road. I’ll feel a whole lot better, too, when I’ve attended to these deeds,” and he patted his breast to make sure of the packet he carried.

“Surely you wouldn’t drop the chase when we’re so near those beasts?” cried Dig.

“We don’t know how near they are. Maybe they’re running yet,” returned Chet grimly.

Their mounts quickened their pace and the boys fell silent. Twilight had fallen, and the immensity of the plains and their loneliness impressed the lads. Suddenly Chet started upright in his saddle and pointed ahead.

“Look!” he cried.

It was the gleam of water. There was no mistaking it. The horses snorted and broke into a trot. It was a fair-sized sheet of water, lying in a little saucer scooped in the plain — a “water-hole” in the West, but what would have been called a “frog-pond” in the East.

Rushes and willows grew about it. There were several stunted trees, too, offering plenty of firewood if not much shelter. The stars were already appearing in the arch of the sky overhead, and that would be their tent-roof.

The two chums became cheerful, however, as soon as they saw water and fuel. An open camp on a fair night like this had no terrors for them.

They unsaddled their mounts, let them drink their

fill, and then hobbled them on a flat piece of prairie next to the camp. The fire was built and the strips of venison toasted. They were ravenously hungry and the remainder of the haunch the robber had left for them now looked very small. There was no more hard-bread.

"Whew!" sighed Digby, "I reckon we'll have to start for Grub Stake bright and early in the morning, for we haven't anything to eat!"

"We still have coffee, and milk for it, and all these cooking things," chuckled Chet. "Lots better off than many hunters. Lost all your desire to shoot a buffalo, Dig?"

"Shooting a buffalo is all right, I don't doubt," returned his chum scornfully, "but chasing all over this country hunting the creatures isn't much fun. Say, Chet!"

"Put a name to it."

"What do you suppose ever scared that wolf so?"

"The wolf that stampeded the buffaloes?"

"Yes."

"You may have three guesses. But that's why we're going to keep watch and watch to-night," Chet said grimly.

"You don't think it was another hunting party?" cried Dig.

"I believe nothing but human beings would have so scared that grey rascal. My! how he ran! I didn't think of it at the time. I was too excited," Chet said reflectively. "But take it from me, boy, that wolf was running from man."

"I don't understand it," declared Dig. "If there had been another party besides us stalking that herd, why didn't we see them?"

"They wouldn't have been very good hunters if we had seen them," laughed Chet.

"I mean after the buffaloes were stampeded. They must have been in that thicket out of which the wolf came."

"Sure. And the very fact we didn't see them after the stampede, makes me suspicious," Chet returned. "I tell you, Dig, that party that stopped on the trail and robbed us last night puzzles me greatly."

"How so?"

"They left the trail somewhere this side of our last camp; but I couldn't see where. They were careful to hide their tracks."

"I reckon, considering that they had robbed us."

“Well, that might be so, too,” ruminated Chet. He did not want to frighten his chum regarding Tony Traddles and the strange man whom Amoshee had said were on the trail behind them. Yet the thought of the pair of rascals stuck in Chet’s mind and dove-tailed into the mystery of the two who had stopped to rob their camp.

“Well,” Dig said finally, “I suppose we’ll have to do as you say—keep watch. But we haven’t seen anything of any prowlers and it is likely those fellows who troubled us before are a long way from here.”

“Hope so,” agreed Chet. “But we’d better be sure than sorry.”

The boys were tired after the activities of the day; but Dig insisted upon standing the first watch. “And believe me!” he said, “I shall march up and down all the time. No sleeping on post this trick!”

Thus dividing the vigil, Chet bade him good-night and rolled up in his blanket. It was a warm night, however, and later, after he was dead asleep, the boy kicked the blanket off.

Dig kept away from him, however. There was no sound of roaming animals of any kind at first, and the watchman did not consider it necessary to

feed the dying fire. The stars rendered a faint light and he could see objects in outline quite plainly.

The horses fed near the camp, and the ripping sound of the grass as their strong teeth severed it from the roots was the only sound Dig apprehended for some time.

It was as quiet here at this water-hole in the great plain as it would have been in Dig's back yard. There was not even the rustle of a breeze in the brakes.

Dig tramped back and forth along the edge of the pool, occasionally stooping down to peer through the dusk at the horses. He could see them better that way. He kept away from his sleeping chum and their outfit purposely. He did not propose to rouse Chet until it was full midnight.

He grew thirsty and started to kneel down by the side of the pool to drink. Then he remembered that the horses had quenched their thirst on this side of the water-hole, and the water was likely to be roiled and muddy. So he started around toward the other side.

The water-hole was twenty yards across and its edge was screened by bushes and brakes for most of the way. Dig looked for an opening where he could

kneel and reach the water, intending to fill his canteen and bring it back with him to the camp.

Poke stamped and whinnied; but Dig did not hear his mount. He kept on until he was fully half way around the water-hole. The plain seemed quite as silent and deserted as before. He could not see the spot where his chum lay nor even the gleam of the firelight now.

Chet was quite given up to sleep. He lay on his back with the neck of his shirt open.

He did not hear the restlessness of the horses, nor any other sound about the camp. Not at first, at least. But when a rifle exploded somewhere near, Chet Havens awoke with a start.

"Hi! what's that?" he ejaculated, and sat up suddenly, throwing off the final restraining folds of the blanket.

"Dig! where are you?" he added and, getting no answer, he scrambled to his feet and picked up his own rifle that had been lying partly under him.

His chum was nowhere to be seen. He shouted again: "Dig! Dig!" and then strained his ear to catch the reply. But there was no immediate answer and Chet found himself shaking with apprehension. What had become of his chum?

CHAPTER XXI

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

CHET'S second thought was, naturally, for the horses. If anything happened to their mounts out here on the plains, they would be in a bad way indeed. They were all of thirty miles from the Grub Stake trail, and if that trail were intersected with a line running directly south from this camp, such intersection would be about midway of the distance between Silver Run and Grub Stake.

In other words, once back upon the trail the boys would have a choice of something like a hundred mile ride to either town. And if they had to walk it!

With his rifle at "ready" Chet stumbled away from the edge of the water-hole until he could get a free sight of the plain on this side. He made out the horses almost immediately. They were feeding contentedly and nothing seemed to have happened to them.

Chet raised his voice again and shouted for his chum. There was no reply, and the boy became

more and more anxious as the moments passed. Where could Dig have gone?

It was just then that Chet heard a strange sound. It must have been going on ever since he was aroused; only his senses had been too dulled with sleep to notice it.

A throbbing sound, that was steadily growing fainter. The boy suddenly came to a sensible conclusion regarding it, and he dropped to his knees and put an ear to the ground.

Horses' hoofs! No doubt of it. The thud of them over the sodded prairies was rapidly decreasing. The horses were now some miles away from the water-hole.

What did it mean? Had an attempt been made to raid the camp again, and had Dig driven the raiders away? Was it he who had fired the shot that awakened Chet? The latter turned back again with a terrible sinking feeling at his heart.

Perhaps there had been a fight and his chum was shot!

Chet Havens was much exercised. He ran to and fro in the camp, trying to find some trace of his chum. There were the saddles — he had used his

own for a pillow; and at this time he did not notice anything else missing.

He shouted again and again, but got no reply. Then he bethought him of the rifle, and he put the heavy weapon to his shoulder and fired three times in the air.

There sounded a squeal from the other side of the water-hole. The horses had snorted, too; but Chet paid them no further attention. He started around the piece of water, yelling for his chum at the top of his voice.

He heard Dig calling after a minute. Then Chet saw him standing by the water's edge and leaning on his gun.

"For goodness' sake! what's the matter with you?" gasped Chet, reaching the other lad. And then he uttered a second startled exclamation. Dig's face was bloody.

"What have you been doing?" demanded Chet again.

"That's this blamed old rifle," snarled Dig. "See what it did?" and he removed the handkerchief with which he was swabbing his brow and showed a deep cut. "That's what it did to me!"

“How?” gasped Chet.

“Kicked!”

“But for goodness’ sake! did you try to put the butt against your forehead when you fired?”

“I don’t know what I did. I was excited. I saw that man on horseback leading the other horse —”

“What man?” interrupted his chum.

“Oh, be still!” exclaimed Dig, with great disgust. “Do you s’pose I stopped to ask him his name and where he came from? I up with the gun to fire a shot to warn you —”

“That must have been what woke me,” said Chet.

“And it’s what put me to sleep,” said Dig, grimly. “I don’t know what happened after this old cannon tried to knock my head off.”

“Tell me what happened before,” urged Chet anxiously.

Dig explained how he had come to start around the pool. He had heard a noise while on this side and, stooping down, he had seen a horseman between him and the background of the sky. The rider was leading a second horse, and was moving quietly toward their encampment.

At first Dig had not known what to do — whether

to return and awaken Chet softly or to keep watch of the man on horseback. And then Dig had seen a man afoot running up from the camp.

"The scoundrel was carrying something. We've been robbed, Chet. Is my saddle all right?"

"Yes. But he might have taken something —"

He clapped his hand to his breast as he spoke. Dig did not notice his agitation and went on with his story.

"Then's when I let go with old Betsy here. And whew! can't she kick some? She knocked me cold, and I just woke up." Then he turned to peer into Chet's face, demanding: "Say, boy! what's the matter with you?"

Chet was absolutely pallid. He lips parted, but were so dry that for a moment he could not speak. Finally he blurted out:

"They — they've got 'em!"

"Got what?" gasped Dig. "Who's got 'em?"

"The deeds."

"Are you crazy, Chet? Nobody's got those deeds. They're in your pocket —"

"No!" cried Chet wildly. "They're gone!"

"Nonsense!"

Chet had drawn open his shirt and turned it so

that Dig could easily feel the empty pocket inside. He could only mutter:

“Whew! what bad luck! what *bad* luck! Don't you think mebbe you've lost 'em, Chet? Dropped 'em out, maybe?”

“I am afraid not,” returned his chum, getting control of himself again. “If you saw one of those men coming from the direction of our camp —”

“Well, he had something besides papers in his hands,” grunted Dig. “Come on! let's go back and see just how bad things are.”

“No matter what other damage they did,” Chet declared, “the loss of the deeds father entrusted to my care is the only really serious loss. I feel dreadfully, Dig. He trusted us, and I let 'em get away from me. And after having had one warning, too!

“Yes! two warnings. Amoshee — John Peep — told me they were on the trail after us.”

“Who were after us? What are you talking about?” demanded the puzzled Digby.

Chet told him as they hastened around the pool to the camp and the horses.

“Well! of all the stingy guys!” exclaimed Dig. “By all the hoptoads that were chased out of Ire-

land! you're the meanest fellow, to keep this all to yourself. Hadn't the first idea that we were being trailed by two villains. Cricky!"

"You talk as if it were fun," said Chet in disgust. "What shall I say to father? He'll blame me — but that doesn't so much matter. I tell you, Dig, I've got to get those deeds back. This fellow is after the old Crayton claim and he'll get the deeds changed, somehow, and get Mr. Morrisy to sign them, and then father will lose what he's already invested in the claim. I tell you, I must get them back!" he repeated, almost in tears.

"Huh!" grunted Digby, "you've got it wrong."

"Have what wrong?" asked Chet, surprised.

"You say you have to get the papers back. Wrong. We have to get 'em back. I'm with you, Chet, no matter how big the job is."

"Oh, thank you, Dig! I know you'll stand by me," Chet declared. "We'll have to start as soon as possible after these thieves. We must pick up their trail and chase them."

The boys reached the camp at this moment. There were a few live coals in the bed of the fire, and Dig stirred them with his foot and then threw

234 The Trail Boys of the Plains

on some light fuel. Soon the blaze sprang up and the light flickered over the spot.

Their saddles had not been touched. Chet had already made sure of that. His own blanket was on the ground where he had flung it off when he arose, awakened by the rifle shot; but Dig's had disappeared.

"By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland!" yelled Dig. "The dirty rascals have swiped my blanket — And the skillet! Holy mackerel, Chet! they've taken the coffee-pot, too, and all the tinware. That would be just like that Tony Tradles! The great, hulking, no-account brute!"

"No use calling him names," said Chet grimly. "They've pretty well cleaned us out. But the worst is the deeds," and he sighed.

"I wonder they didn't take the horses," exclaimed Dig.

"Your seeing them and firing the gun probably saved our mounts for us," his chum said.

"But if I'd stayed in the camp they wouldn't have cleaned us out," said Dig thoughtfully.

"Not so sure. They might have crept up on you and knocked you on the head."

"Instead of which that old Betsy gun had to

knock me over. Just as bad. It knocked me out for the time being, and those scoundrels got away."

"They must have been close in, watching you and me, when you started around the pond," Chet explained. "We know what Tony is — a bad man. The fellow with him is probably worse. They wouldn't think anything of knocking us both out if they hadn't got what they wanted without."

"Well, what's done is done," Dig said mournfully. "Now what shall we do?"

"We can't do much till daylight. It's no fun following a horse trail in the night — and those horses started on the gallop. They will be tiring their mounts out while ours are resting. We'll lose nothing by waiting till dawn," Chet said, with confidence.

CHAPTER XXII

AFTER THE THIEVES

DIGBY was strongly disgusted with himself. He felt that, to a degree, he was to be blamed for both raids upon their camp.

"The first time I fell plumb asleep," he said. "And now I went away from the fire for a foolish reason. Just for a drink! But I declare, Chet, I don't believe I would have done it if I'd known there was any reason to suspect a return of those thieves."

"I blame myself, Dig. I should have told you," admitted Chet.

"Just the same, maybe I wouldn't have believed you. To think of a man's coming right into the camp and taking those papers out of your shirt!"

"I reckon I sleep mighty hard," said Chet thoughtfully. "I know mother has hard work to wake me up in the morning, sometimes. A good hunter ought to sleep lightly."

"There are no medals on either of us," commented Dig. "Those fellows must be laughing at us."

"We'll make them laugh on the other side of

their mouths if we catch them!" declared Chet, with anger.

"How?"

"I'm very sure they are not so well mounted as we are. Poke and Hero are two of the best horses owned in Silver Run — you know that."

"Sure!"

"And it stands to reason the thieves are not so well armed as we are."

"Whew! you don't mean to chase them and shoot them, Chet?" demanded the startled Digby.

"Of couse not! But I'm glad to know that we've got rifles that will probably shoot a good deal farther than any weapons they may carry."

"Huh!" said Dig, scarcely understanding. Then he inquired: "Do you suppose, Chet, that these were the chaps that startled that wolf yesterday, and spoiled our buffalo hunt?"

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," said Chet.

"Ho! then let's catch and hang 'em," grinned Digby. "No punishment is too bad for them."

But neither boy could extract many smiles from the situation. As it chanced, the thieves had overlooked their remaining piece of deer meat. Their pocket drinking-cups were left them, too. They

toasted the meat over the fire and washed it down with water, thus making an early and frugal breakfast.

It was growing faintly light in the east by this time, foretelling an early summer dawn. Dig brought in the horses and watered them, while Chet filled the canteens.

There was not much remaining of their outfit to make ready for departure. The thieves had not left them a single cooking utensil; but they had coffee, condensed milk, pepper and salt.

“That blamed Tony Traddles is just mean enough to do a thing like this,” Dig declared. “But we’ll get square yet!”

The boys had an idea as to which direction the two midnight raiders had headed. It was at the western end of the pool that Dig had seen the one in the saddle waiting for his comrade.

“If they intend to make any use of those deeds father intrusted to me,” Chet said, “they will hike out for Grub Stake.”

“Good-bye to the buffaloes, then,” sighed Dig. “We won’t see them again.”

“I don’t suppose so,” returned his chum. “But getting those deeds to Mr. John Morrisy is of more

importance than shooting the big bull. Father trusted us to do his errand, and we've got to do it."

"How'll you make those fellows give up the deeds, Chet?" queried Dig, in wonder.

"I don't know; but I'll find a way when we catch up with them, don't you fret."

When the horses were saddled and ready, Chet went ahead, leading Hero, and found the place where the second man had mounted and the two riders had wheeled and galloped away from the camp they had robbed.

Chet Havens was quite a sensible lad for his age, and he secretly wondered why the thieves had been so afraid of two boys. It scarcely seemed reasonable that they should be so fearful.

"Unless it was Dig's rifle shot that scared them off," he thought. "Perhaps the men are not prepared to face rifles. Yet, I am quite sure they were stalking the buffaloes as well as we. They could not expect to shoot such beasts with pop-guns."

It was easy to follow the trail left by the riders for some miles. The hoofs of their horses cut the sod sharply, and threw up bits of turf as the animals scurried over the ground.

The route the thieves had followed was across a

range quite unfamiliar to the chums from Silver Run. It led almost due west, and the trail was possibly parallel with the trace leading to Grub Stake.

It puzzled Chet at first why the men had not struck out immediately for the Grub Stake trail. But after riding for about five miles, and finding that the trail was very plain, he suddenly discovered the meaning of it.

The thieves had ridden down the sloping bank of a wide but easily forded stream, in the shallows of which the trace disappeared.

"They've taken to the water, but we don't know which way they've gone," cried Dig, in disgust.

"It's a fact that we don't know for sure," Chet returned thoughtfully. "But I think it's a trick."

"Of course it's a trick — and one meant to throw us off the track. We'll have a nice time searching along these banks to find the place where they came out of the water."

"That's right — if we searched," answered Chet, as Hero drank his fill.

"What do you mean? You going to give up?"

"Not much!" exclaimed the other young trail hunter.

"What you going to do, then?" demanded the puzzled Dig.

"I'm going to fool them. I don't know where they left the stream, and I don't care. There is one thing I am sure of."

"Huh?"

"They're going to Grub Stake. I bet they want to get there before we do. That man — whoever he is — is planning to make some use of those deeds he stole from me. So, take it from me, boy, they are not going far out of the straight way to Grub Stake."

"Whew! that's reasonable, old man."

"Then we'll cross here and keep right on. We'll bear off gradually toward the regular trail to Grub Stake. I bet we pick up the trace of these two rascals before long."

"Long head! Long head!" declared Dig admiringly. "Come on! these horses will drink so much water they'll be water-logged and can't travel. Hike out o' there, Poke, you villain!"

The boys cantered through the shoals and out upon the other bank. When they reached the upper edge of the river bank Chet rose in his stirrups and swept the plain all about for some sign of moving objects.

242 The Trail Boys of the Plains

The thieves had not taken his field-glasses, for they had been in the pocket of his saddle.

A little to the northwest, but far, far away, the boy saw two black specks. They did not look bigger than buzzards, but Chet Havens thought they were the mounted men. He passed the glasses to Dig.

"Look at them, old man," he said. "We don't want to chase way over there for nothing."

"Whew!" quoth Dig. "We couldn't go for nothing, Chet. Either they are the men we are after, or it's game that we need. Don't overlook the fact that we've got to eat. Chewing dry coffee, nor yet drinking condensed milk, doesn't appeal to me."

"I don't know but you're right," agreed Chet. "Much as I want to overtake those miserable thieves, we must not overlook the fact that we have to eat to live."

"That sounds good," grinned Dig. "Mother says I just live to eat. There is a difference."

The boys rode on, but the two objects they had seen disappeared in a coulie. Later they saw them and identified them as two grazing animals.

"Of course, not the buffaloes," said Chet doubtfully.

"Why! they went the other way!" Dig declared. "Isn't that so?"

"We suppose so. Hard to tell what a frightened bunch of animals will do, though I supposed they would continue to graze northeast."

"Never mind. We'll see what those things are if they'll let us get near enough."

It wasn't long before the boys identified the moving objects (of which they caught sight now and then as they cantered over the rolling prairie) as a pair of elks. The spreading horns of the male were quite easily seen.

"If we get one of those, boy, it's going to be no cinch," declared Digby Fordham. "That's a big buck."

"We'll try, at least," said his chum. "If you don't at first succeed, you know —"

"Oh, yes! I know," returned Dig. "Suck eggs! But I'm not fond of 'em in that way. Take it from me, I don't care to 'try, try again' for those elks. We're soon going to be just as hungry as ever Robinson Crusoe was. Fix it so I get a shot at one of 'em from a rest, Chet."

"Well! don't rest the butt of your rifle against your forehead again," advised Chet, glancing at

the smear of blood that had oozed through the handkerchief Dig had bound about his brow.

"Watch me!" growled Dig. "I won't shoot this old gun again without being mighty sure that she isn't going to kick me."

When they came to the next water-hole he dismounted and bathed the wound on his forehead. It was a bad gash, and the forehead was sore and bruised all about the wound.

"Talk about being wounded in the war," said Dig grimly, as Chet tied the handkerchief again. "I ought to get a pension. My uncle carried this old rifle for three years in the war, and I bet I'm the only one that's ever been wounded with it."

"And that at the wrong end," chuckled Chet. "But didn't your uncle ever shoot at the enemy?"

"I don't believe so. He was too tender-hearted. It's a family trait," said Dig gravely.

"I bet you don't show any of that tenderness of heart if we come within shooting distance of those elks," said Chet, climbing back into the saddle.

"Now, aren't you just right?" proclaimed Digby.

They galloped on, seeing the elks from the next rise not more than three miles away. How the graceful creatures had come out here on the plain

was something of a mystery — especially without more of their tribe.

Now Chet took the lead and governed the approach to the feeding place of the elks. There were no thickets, but there were several mounds behind which the young hunters could screen themselves.

Yet none of these shelters was near enough to enable the boys to get within easy rifle shot. They tried one mound, dismounting and lying flat, to rest the barrels of their guns over the top of the rise.

But the distance was too great. Dig wanted to try it, but Chet forbade him to shoot.

“The elks are travelling away from us. If you wounded one, it would gallop farther and farther away. Then we’d likely lose the game entirely. If we could get around ahead of them it would do to risk a long shot. But of course they are feeding up wind.”

“What will we do, Chet? Don’t forget that starvation stares us in the face.”

“Pull in your belt a little more,” grinned Chet.

“Whew! if I pull it in much tighter,” declared Dig, “I’ll cut myself in two. I’ve got a waist like a wasp already. My stomach thinks my throat’s cut. I tell you, boy, we’ve got to eat!”

246 The Trail Boys of the Plains

Dig was much in earnest. It was pressing close to noon and their breakfast — and the previous evening's meal — had not been very satisfactory. Chet was just as earnest in his desire to kill game; yet, he would not have started this way had he not at first thought that the elks were mounted men.

Being on the ground, however, he set his wits to winning out against the cunning of the game. He and Dig rode around several mounds and finally came to a shallow valley between two of the small eminences, and through which they might ride right out upon the little prairie on which the elks grazed.

“And that's the best we can do, Dig, I believe,” Chet declared. “We couldn't possibly steal up within sure rifle shot, afoot. Got to trust to our horses being quicker on their feet than the elks for the first few jumps. And don't let your rifle smash your face again!”

“Let's get down and cinch up,” said Dig nervously. “If our saddles should slip —”

“Hold on! hold on, boy!” advised Chet, under his breath. “Don't you have an attack of elk fever at the critical moment.”

“Stop talking, and come on,” urged Dig, pulling

up on Poke's straps until the black mustang squealed. "Do hush, you black abomination! Don't you give us away."

Into the saddles again, and the boys looked at each other. It was to be a race of a quarter of a mile or more before they came within rifle range of the feeding elks. Chet nodded and Dig returned it. Then they gave their mounts free rein, and Hero and Poke dashed forward.

They went through the cut between the hills with a rush, their quick feet padding lightly on the sod. Out upon the prairie they debouched, gradually separating so as to have a better chance at the elks.

The latter kept their heads down, feeding. The patter of the horses' hoofs upon the sod was almost soundless. The boys were coming up behind the elks and in another minute —

Dig began to raise his rifle slowly; Poke was running with free bridle, for his master could guide him by the pressure of his knees as well as by pulling on the bit.

But Dig was too early. They were not to come so easily upon the elks. Of a sudden the grazing animals jerked up their heads and glanced around.

It did not seem as though they could have seen the hunters; but they caught the vibration of the pounding hoofs.

They were off like darts, swerving from the direction the boys came, stretching out to reach the swell of the nearest hillock.

“Come on!” yelled Chet, and pounded Hero in the flank with his heels.

The horses seemed to enter into the spirit of the chase. They thundered up the rise at the heels of the elks. Dig wanted to shoot at once; but Chet begged him not to.

“You’ll be shooting right into the air as we go up hill!” he shouted. “You’ll shoot clean over their heads, Dig.”

“I don’t want to lose my chance as I did with those buffaloes,” returned Dig, much worried.

“Wait till we’re over the rise. Then we can shoot down on them —”

But Chet was mistaken. The elks flew over the rise. It would have been a long shot had they tried it then. On rushed the bay and the black, both as eager in the chase as their young masters.

Chet fairly rose in his stirrups to see over the round top of the mound. He saw the tossing horns

of the bigger elk; and then — he saw something else!

“Dig! Dig! they’re here!” he gasped, and almost fell out of his saddle, he was so amazed.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FIRST BUFFALO

CHET was taller than his chum and he had risen in his stirrups, while Dig lay out on the black's neck and cheered him on. So the first named lad saw over the rise and out upon the plain.

The two elks were hammering down the slope, their slender legs doubling under their round bodies, and stretching out again with almost bewildering swiftness — like the driving-rods of fast-turning engines. But they were a good shot, if not an easy one, for the boys were not directly behind them. A ball, directed properly, would have raked either beast from forward of the hip into, and through, the heart. This was not to be, however. Chet and Dig were destined never to knock over those elks.

What arrested Chet's hand was the sight of a herd of animals grazing on the plain, and almost as close to him as the elks. The sight of them brought the cry to his lips:

“Dig! Dig! they're here!”

“Who are here? Those rascals?” Dig yelled,

thinking first of the thieves who had robbed them the night before.

But the next moment he saw the grazing herd —
the sixteen buffaloes!

“After them! Quick!” shrieked Dig, and spurred his black.

He almost seemed to lift Poke off his feet when he struck the tiny spurs into him. Poke shot ahead of the bay and Dig rose in his stirrups.

He was not as good a shot as Chet; but he could not miss that brown body which was squarely in front of him. It was not the big bull Dig aimed at; that animal, in fact, he did not see. But the creature in line with his rifle barrel was big enough.

It was a well grown bull, and when it raised its head and swung the huge bulk of it to see the charging boys, it looked formidable. The chums were tearing down upon the buffaloes, losing sight of the elks entirely. The nobler game made them ignore the other.

Naturally, the elks charging down into the herd startled the buffaloes before the boys themselves were seen. Most of the buffaloes sprang away on a gallop.

But the young bull for which Dig aimed was too

late. The boy fitted the heavy rifle-stock snugly into his shoulder — no chance for it to kick him this time — and fired almost over Poke's ears at the huge brown body.

He made a bull's-eye. The thud of the bullet could be heard plainly by both furiously riding boys. But he did not hit a vital spot, having aimed too far back of the foreleg.

Chet had checked Hero, riding to give to his chum all the room he needed. The other buffaloes scuttled across the plain so rapidly that the bay — heavily loaded as he was — could scarcely have caught them and so given his master a shot. The stricken bull did not follow his mates, but wheeled on Poke and, head down, charged him and his rider.

“Look out, Dig!” shouted Chet in superfluous warning.

The buffalo moved with surprising swiftness; but even at that Dig could have easily got in a second shot had the mechanism of his rifle not fouled for a second.

That second was long enough to put the boy in danger. For the charge of the wounded buffalo meant peril.

Chet yelled and urged Hero after the angry

animal. The bull buffalo was not blind with rage, whatever else he was. He turned as nimbly as a cat, in spite of his bulk, and was fairly upon the black horse as the latter wheeled to escape.

“Shoot him, Chet!” begged Dig, dropping his rifle to save himself from a fall as Poke whirled. The mustang leaped away, but the maddened bull was right at his heels. Of course, given a few moments, Poke could have distanced the buffalo; but at the time, the situation was serious.

Chet, on Hero, came thundering along upon the buffalo's off side. The boy had not raised his rifle to his shoulder, but he was alert.

“Shoot!” again begged Dig, in alarm.

Chet forced the snorting bay up beside the charging buffalo. He leaned over suddenly, clapping the rifle-butt to his shoulder, and looked over the sights directly at a patch behind the fore-shoulder.

When the rifle spoke the huge head of the buffalo was almost under Poke's belly. The buffalo ran with his nose barely clearing the ground. Now his head dropped, struck into the sod, and so swiftly was he going that the momentum caused the bull to turn a complete somersault.

The ball had gone through the buffalo's heart,

and he was instantly dead. The boys pulled in their horses to blow, and to look at their wonderful quarry.

“Whew!” wheezed Dig, rather shakily, “that was great, old man. I believe he’d have had me and Poke.”

“Oh, Dig! isn’t it a great kill?” gasped Chet, just as excited as he could be. “To think of us killing a big buffalo like this!”

“Lots I had to do with it,” grumbled his chum. “It was your shot brought him down.”

“But if it hadn’t been for your wounding him, I don’t think he’d be lying here at all. They’re pretty tough creatures to kill, boy.”

“Cricky! I should say they were. And as wicked as lions or bears. Whew! I feel as though I’d had a narrow escape, Chet.”

“I reckon you have!”

“And that confounded old rifle! It fouled just as I tried to work the lever.”

“Well! let’s be glad it was no worse. And, Dig! we’ve got the buffalo — the first buffalo we ever shot.”

“You’re a wonder, Chet,” declared his generous chum. “You put that ball right where it would do

the most good. I lost my head completely — I own up to that. Talk about elk fever! that creature looked as big as a house to me,” and Dig laughed.

“It is a mystery to me how such a big creature could be killed by only two bullets,” said Chet. They had dismounted now and stood beside the inert body of the buffalo bull. “I read, though, that some Indians when riding to kill a buffalo would force their ponies close up to the running beast and drive an arrow clear through his body. What do you know about that?”

“Don’t know anything about it,” returned Dig, with a whimsical look, “but I think that the fellow that told that ought to be woke up — he was lying on his back!”

“I don’t know about its being a dream. Before they got to fooling with the cast-off firearms of the white man, the Indian must have done a lot of killing with arrows and spears.”

“That’s all right. You can have such hardware if you want,” returned Dig. “Give me a rifle every time.”

“Even if it fouls in the breach?” chuckled Chet.

256 The Trail Boys of the Plains

Every creature but themselves and their mounts had disappeared from the plain by this time. They straightened the dead beast out and then rolled it on its back.

Much as he deplored any delay at this time, Chet could not think of going on and leaving the hide of the buffalo. Butchering the huge creature would be hard work for two boys with their little experience in such work; but they needed a part of the animal for food.

Dig vowed he could eat it all — horns and hide — he was so hungry!

They picketed the horses, removed their own coats, and whetted their knives. It was difficult work to get the hide off the buffalo, for the carcass weighed all of six hundred pounds — all the weight the two boys could possibly roll on the clean sward. They were more than an hour in getting the hide clear; Dig was satisfied to give up the idea of saving the head for mounting, although Chet managed it so that the horns came with the hide.

“Say! that’ll be something to show ’em back home!” panted Dig, holding up the fore part of the hide. “Cricky, Chet! we ought to have been photographed beside of this beast. Whew! he looks big-

ger now he's skinned than he did before. Wish somebody that needed it had all this meat."

"I wish he did," agreed Chet.

"But never mind," said Dig, the next minute. "We need some of it right now. Wish we had something to boil the tongue in."

But they opened the carcass to drain it (as well as it could be drained on the ground) and cut out several ribs for their own supper.

"Two meals together!" Dig declared. "I've got to catch up on my rations, Chet."

There was a thicket near, and the boys gathered fuel and made a hot fire. They broiled the ribs on green withes, and, still having seasoning, they made a hearty repast, while the horses cropped the buffalo grass eagerly.

It was late afternoon when this was over and Chet said they must move on. They cut out the tidbits and several good steaks; but were forced to leave the rest of the meat for the coyotes, who were already hovering on the tops of the hillocks.

"Good-bye, first buffalo!" exclaimed Dig, looking back at the red carcass. "It's the greatest kill we ever had, Chet, old boy! Won't your folks and mine be surprised when they see this robe?"

258 The Trail Boys of the Plains

"I hope we can cure the robe in time, so that it will be a nice one," Chet said, with some anxiety. "We must spread it out carefully every place we camp."

"And, say! where will we camp next?" cried Dig. "We're a long way off the Grub Stake trail."

"It's still south of us, somewhere," said his chum. "We'll find it. But I hope we'll pick up the trail of those two robbers first."

"By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland!" exclaimed Dig. "I had forgotten all about them."

"I hadn't," returned Chet grimly. "We must find them, boy."

"Do you suppose they came this way after the buffaloes?"

"I don't believe they knew any more about the course the buffaloes took than we did. They are aiming for Grub Stake, just the same."

"So are the buffaloes," said Dig. "At least, they were when they went out of sight."

"In that general direction — yes."

"Whew! Suppose we overtake them again, Chet?"

“Then maybe we’ll get a second robe. Otherwise we’ll have to cast lots for the one you’re sitting on right now, Dig,” and young Havens laughed.

Nevertheless, excited as the boys were over the buffalo herd, Chet insisted in slanting at a sharper angle south than the big game had taken. It was the trail of the two men who had robbed them that Chet was the more anxious to pick up.

He was a brave boy — and a determined. His father had entrusted him with the papers relating to John Morrisy’s share in the Crayton claim. Mr. Havens’ lawyer in Silver Run had prepared the documents. For all Chet knew, the names might be changed in the body of the documents and then, if Mr. Morrisy signed them, they would give somebody besides Mr. Havens title to the old mine.

The loss of the documents worried Chet greatly. He felt, somehow, that he had been to blame in allowing the thieves to get the deeds. He should have been more watchful, especially after the warning he had had of threatening danger.

The horses were still fresh, although they had travelled some distance that day. They kept on at a fast pace for several hours — until, indeed, the sun was down. There was then a strip of timber

ahead, which seemed to extend clear across the plain, as far as the eye could see, from north to south.

“And no sign of those rascals yet,” grumbled Dig. “Could we have crossed their trail without knowing it?”

“Sure!” admitted Chet promptly. “I’ve been looking sharply for signs, and so have you. But everything or anything is possible on the trail. We aren’t the smartest fellows who ever lived, Dig. If we were only a little bit smarter we wouldn’t have been robbed at all.”

“Don’t rub it in,” grumbled Digby. “I hold myself responsible for all this trouble.”

“I don’t hold you responsible. Just bad luck and bad figuring. I am fully as much to blame as you are. I had reason to believe we were being followed, and you hadn’t. Humph! No use crying over spilled milk.”

“That’s all right,” said Dig. “But where are we going to camp to-night? In the open, or shall we push on to that timber?”

“We’ll be more sheltered there,” Chet said, gazing ahead at the distant line of trees. “There is water between here and there. We can let the

horses drink, refill our canteens, and push on for the woods."

"Just as you say. Get up, Poke!"

The timber was much farther away than it seemed, however. The boys did find water; rather, they let the horses find it for them. But it was an open water-hole and the sun had evaporated the water until it was very low.

"Maybe there will be a running stream in the woods. This is as flat as dishwater," declared Dig, tasting it. "'Tisn't fit to drink straight. Wish we could boil some of our coffee."

"Let's keep on to the timber and make a regular camp," Chet advised. "Then I'll rig something to hold a canteen over the fire and make coffee."

"You can't do it."

"Well, I can try," returned Chet. "Anyway, we'll take shelter in the woods. Our camp won't be spotted so far."

"Waugh!" ejaculated Dig, with disgust. "No use in locking the stable after the horse has been swiped. Those fellows don't want anything more of us, that's sure. They'll let us alone after this, I reckon."

But he did not oppose his chum's suggestion.

They got into the saddle again and pushed for the timber line. The sun had sunk altogether behind the mountains and darkness on the plain gathered quickly. The timber was tall and thick and they were in the shadow of it for some time before they reached the first line of trees.

It was Chet who observed the light first. It twinkled at a stationary point some distance back in the forest.

He drew in Hero quickly and put out a hand to warn Dig back. "There's a campfire," he said quietly.

"Whew! Who's that, do you suppose?"

"That's what we want to find out," Chet said, with decision. "And we want to find it out before we get into any trouble. Look out, Dig! that black scamp is going to whinny."

Dig swiftly stifled that desire on Poke's part by pinching his nostrils between thumb and finger.

"There are other horses here, you may be sure. We'd better take our horses back farther and tether them before we do anything else."

"No," said Chet, thoughtfully. "We'll put on their hobbles. We might need our ropes," he added, which made Dig look at him curiously.

CHAPTER XXIV

TIT FOR TAT

TEN minutes later the two chums entered the forest and crept toward the light. That it was a campfire neither doubted; there could be no question about that.

"What you going to do with these lariats?" Dig whispered, for Chet had insisted that each carry the rope which hung at his cante.

"Never mind! hush!" urged Chet, with more vigour than politeness.

There might be very good reason for a silent approach to the camp. Whether it was the camp of the thieves who had troubled them the previous night or not, the campers might be men whom the boys would not care to meet.

"We'll spy on them first," Chet had declared, and now they proceeded to carry out his intention.

The timber was big and open. It was really fair grazing ground, for there were few shrubs. Before they had penetrated far into the wood the boys descried two ponies feeding. The animals

gave them no attention, so, plainly, they were used to white men. Indian ponies would have snorted and stamped at the approach of any white visitors.

The campfire blazed brightly; but there was no smell of cooking. It was evident that the campers had finished supper. Chet led the way around to the windward and they got the smell of tobacco smoke quite strongly.

"They're sitting there smoking; but they are not talking much," whispered Chet. "We know there are at least two, for both those horses are saddle horses. I bet they are the fellows we are after."

"Whew! What'll we do now we've found them, Chet?" whispered his chum, in return.

"Get nearer and make sure. Then we'll see," said Chet, with confidence.

"I hope we'll see," muttered Dig, "but it's blamed dark."

They both remembered their training under old Rafe, however. The hunter had taught them how to move quietly in the night, and through thickets far more dense than this. Soon the two chums, side by side, were in view of the tiny clearing where the fire burned.

Their suspicions were correct on the first count, at least. There were two men at the fire.

One was lying on his back with a blanket wrapped around him, while his big, black hat was tipped over his face. Dig pinched Chet sharply, and when his chum turned to scowl at him, the excited lad mouthed the words:

“My blanket!”

Chet nodded. He recognised the stolen covering. There could be no doubt but these two men were the ones who had robbed them. Besides there were the coffee-pot and some of their cooking utensils on a log near the fire.

Dig's eyes snapped and he doubled his fist and shook it at the prostrate man, who was evidently asleep.

It was just then that Chet touched his chum's arm and pointed to the second figure by the campfire. This man was sitting, with his back against a log and his knees drawn up. He was the one who smoked, and it was both a vile pipe and strong tobacco he was sucking on.

Dig nodded vigorously when he made out the features of this man in the shadow. “It's Tony,”

266 The Trail Boys of the Plains

he breathed in Chet's ear. "But who's he?" and he pointed to the sleeping man.

Chet shook his head over that question. Somehow that broad-brimmed, black hat looked familiar; but Chet could not place it just then. Besides, he was too anxious regarding what they should do with these two rascals.

Chet had refused to let Dig bring his rifle; but both boys carried their ropes. He saw that Tony Traddles cuddled a rifle in the hollow of his arm; it had slipped down until it lay in such a position that the man would have hard work to grab it up quickly. As for the sleeping rascal, Chet could not see that he was armed at all.

The boys both had their revolvers, but at the start Chet had forbidden Dig to flourish his pistol.

"Somebody might get hurt. They've stolen from us, but they did not try to injure us. And how we should feel if we managed to seriously hurt one of them!"

Of course, in a sober moment, Dig would have agreed to this; but at the time he grumbled some.

"They didn't hurt us? Huh! look at my forehead. If it hadn't been for them, I wouldn't have a headache."

He was in full accord with his chum, however, agreeing that Chet should take the lead. Tony Traddles, the bewhiskered, ragged tramp, was really nodding as he pretended to keep watch before the brightly burning fire. He pulled at his pipe slowly; his effort to draw the smoke into his mouth was almost mechanical.

Dig was the better of the two chums with the rope, as well as with horses. Chet signalled him to watch the sleeping man so that when he roused and sat up Dig could noose him before he had a chance to seize a weapon. For his own part, Chet stepped away a few paces and made ready his lariat.

There were no trees or shrubs in the way. Tony's eyes were too full of sleep to see him. Besides, both boys were behind the log and Tony would have had to turn his head to catch a glimpse of them.

Dig was getting nervous when he saw his chum taking so much time for his preparations. Suppose Tony aroused suddenly — or the other man?

But Chet was not going to miss his man by any over-eagerness. He made sure the coil of the rope ran free and that the noose was open. Then he threw the lariat and it dropped just where he wanted

268 The Trail Boys of the Plains

it to — over the head and shoulders of the gorilla-like rascal.

“Help!” grunted Tony, who had been quite asleep, feeling the tightening of the noose about his arms.

His partner sprang almost instantly into a sitting posture, and his hand went to a six-shooter that he had holstered at his hip. But Dig was ready. He uttered a yell of derision and dropped his noose over the villain, whipping it so tight at the first pull that the man uttered a cry of pain.

“Got him!” cried Dig.

Chet had been just as quick as his chum. When he pulled the line taut he sprang over the log and landed right on the back of Tony Traddles, knocking the big fellow forward on his face.

The boy fastened the rope with a good knot and left Tony thrashing about and sputtering, while he ran to see that Dig and his prisoner were all right. The man with the black sombrero could not get at his gun, and struggle as he did he could not loosen the rope. Soon the boys had wound the slack of the lariat around him, from elbows to heels, and laid him out like an “Indian papoose,” as Dig said, chuckling.

Then the chums went to Tony and, in spite of his kicking, and ignoring his threats, they triced him up as carefully and securely as they had his comrade in crime.

“I know who that other man is now,” said Chet. “Don’t you recognise him, Dig?”

“No. My acquaintance doesn’t run among such fellows as he,” answered Dig. “The mean thief! That’s my blanket he was sleeping in. I’ll take it and hang it over a bush to air.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Chet, smiling. “He’s the fellow who was hanging around our house. Don’t you remember that when I shot that hawk, he was there? And he is the same fellow who, the day of the cave-in at the mine, was up in the mountain with Amoshee.”

“With John Peep?”

“Yes. I know he is interested in the Crayton claim, and he’s stolen those deeds from me. I’m going to get them back,” and Chet approached the man with determination.

“You keep away from me, you young snipe!” growled the man. “When I get out o’ this I’ll make you sweat.”

“You’re going to perspire yourself, mister, I

should think," said Dig, giggling. "We have you right. You stole from us —"

"Nothing of the kind!" blustered the fellow. "We never saw you before."

"I think we recognise that blanket and those pots and pans," said Chet gravely. "You needn't tell stories about it. You robbed us and now we're going to take our things back."

"We ought to drive them along to Grub Stake, too," suggested Dig, "and turn them over to the police."

"You young smart Alecks will get your com-up-ance," muttered the man. "You let me loose or it will be the worse for you."

"How about me?" bawled Tony. "I'll break 'em in two if I git my hands on 'em. That boy of old Havens' 'specially."

Chet meanwhile had approached the black-hatted man, and now he began to search his pockets. The man used frightful threats to check him; but Chet was not to be stopped.

"You might as well save your breath to cool your porridge," quoth Dig, grinning. "My chum is going to get back those deeds, and don't you forget it!"

“What deeds?” snarled the man. “You’re trying to rob me. Better let my wallet alone.”

But there was nothing in the nature of deeds about the fellow, although Chet examined his clothes carefully. The boy’s hopes sank very low as he proceeded with the search.

The man snarled at him and threatened, but Chet thought that he seemed disturbed himself over the result of the investigation. Chet went toward Tony and that scoundrel cried:

“You won’t get nothin’ off’n me, young Havens. Sue a beggar and get his rags — that’s all. Don’t know nothin’ about no deeds. Go away!”

But Chet insisted on searching him, and Dig helped. Then, when they had come to a resultless finish, the two boys stood up and looked at each other.

They had found and made prisoners the men who they knew had robbed them; but the main object to be attained — the recovery of the precious papers Chet was carrying to Grub Stake — seemed just as far off as ever. Neither of the captives was in possession of the deeds.

CHAPTER XXV

CHET'S DETERMINATION

"By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland!" Dig vowed. "Have we chased these snoozers all this way for nothing?"

"Let's search 'em again," insisted Chet grimly. "They took those deeds out of my pocket and they have them somewhere."

"Don't you boys maul me all over no more," said Tony complainingly. "I tell ye, ye won't find nothin' on me — and ye tickle. I never could stand being tickled. Lemme up," and the rough fellow grinned up into their faces in a most knowing way.

"No," said Chet slowly. "We'll not let you up yet. I think you'd look pretty going back to Silver Run with a rope around you."

"Back to the Run?" questioned Dig, puzzled.

"No use our going on to Grub Stake if we can't find the deeds," said Chet sternly. "And what do you suppose the boys at father's mine would do to this scamp if they got hold of him again?"

"Aw — say!" growled Tony. "You're too fresh. I don't want to go back to the mine."

"Then where are those papers?" Chet demanded earnestly.

"Don't ask me about 'em. I never had 'em," declared the man.

"But you've seen them? Your partner had them? And he has them yet, I believe," cried Chet, turning sharply on the other villain.

"Find out!" snarled that individual.

"I'll find out before I let you free," promised the lad.

"Say!" exclaimed Tony. "Don't hold me for Steve's sins. I took your coffee-pot and truck and you got 'em back. Now let up on a feller."

"Why should I?" Chet demanded seriously. "I've got to find the deeds."

"I ain't got 'em — honest!" declared Tony.

"I wouldn't take your word for it," growled Dig, in the background.

"Well! you might as well believe me," almost whined the big fellow. "I don't want you boys to keep me tied up this a-way."

"Shut up, you sniveler!" commanded the man called Steve, from the other side of the fire.

“Say! you can shut up yourself,” cried Tony. “I knowed you’d get us into trouble. These are two powerful smart boys and we’d oughtn’t to have treated ’em so mean. Give ’em the papers back, Steve.”

“Shut your mouth!” yelled the other man. “I haven’t the papers.”

“Well, you had ’em,” grumbled Tony.

“We’ll search him again — to the skin,” said Chet bitterly. “Come on, Dig. Hold your gun on him,” and he approached Steve.

But he had no idea that the man did have the papers. He had already searched the scoundrel too thoroughly to have missed any hiding place for the deeds his father had entrusted to him. Chet felt very bad indeed.

“I tell you boys — and you might as well understand me,” said the man, Steve, threateningly, “I haven’t got those deeds. I’ve dropped ’em somewhere — and I don’t know where. Back where we camped at noon, maybe. That’s straight.”

“Let’s look around the camp here,” proposed Dig, knowing how unhappy his chum felt, and wishing to help.

He threw an armful of light wood on the fire and

the blaze sprang up immediately, illuminating the clearing more fully. Already Dig had collected their possessions into a heap. He found every article they had missed.

Searching the camp did no good, however. As Dig said, they did not leave a leaf unturned. But the deeds were not to be found. Their size and the stiffness of the legal paper on which they were written would have made it impossible for Steve to have hidden the documents in any small space. Supposing he had doubted the honesty of Tony (which he well might) Steve may have thought of hiding the papers before he went to sleep. But where?

The boys almost tore his saddle to pieces looking for the documents. They pulled off his boots and made sure the papers were not in his socks. When they got through their final search they were convinced that the deeds were not on either man or anywhere about the camp.

"What do you think, Chet?" asked Dig, in a low tone. "Is the fellow telling the truth?"

"I am inclined to believe he is," Chet returned, with a sigh. "It's a tough proposition. I feel dreadfully bad about it. What will father say?"

"But, Chet! He can't blame us."

"He'll blame me. And why shouldn't he? He entrusted me with the deeds and I had no business to lose them."

"Well!" said Dig slowly. "What shall we do now? Going to leave these fellows tied up for the wolves to eat?"

"Hey!" shouted Tony. "Don't you do that. There are wolves about."

Chet picked up Tony's old rifle and noted its make and calibre. Then he looked at the long barreled pistol they had taken away from the other man. There were no other weapons in the possession of the two scoundrels.

"We'll untie them, I reckon, and let them up," Chet said slowly. "Nothing else to do that I can see. But I want you fellows to understand," he added, facing the men, "that we both carry rifles that will outshoot this old piece of junk," and he tapped Tony's gun, "by about an eighth of a mile. Don't come fooling around our camp again, for if you do we'll shoot," and he said it in a tone that carried conviction.

Neither of the men said a word as the boys carefully removed the strong ropes. Then Dig picked up their possessions, and carried them to a distance

—yet not so far away that the light of the campfire could not be seen. Later he brought the horses and the rifles.

When the rifles were in their hands Chet agreed to leave the scoundrels alone. But he advised the men to keep a bright fire going for the rest of the night.

“If we see it die down at all,” Chet threatened grimly, “whichever of us is awake will be very apt to send a bullet or two over here to wake you up. Come on, Dig,” and he walked backwards out of the rascals’ camp.

The boys cooked and ate a hearty supper — and they needed it. Chet sat so that he could see into the rascals’ camp and he kept the heavy rifle beside him. Of course, had the two men begun stirring around, he would only have fired into the tree-tops to scare them; but as he told Digby, a firm stand was necessary.

“And where they go, *we* go,” Chet Havens declared. “They have lost the deeds, without much doubt. But they’ll go to look for them. That Steve will remember where he dropped them.”

“Do you mean to tag around after those chaps?” gasped his chum.

"Yes, I do. That is my determination," said Chet, nodding vigorously. "It is our best chance to find the papers, whether they have dropped them, or whether Steve was lying about it and has got them hidden away somewhere."

"He said he might have dropped them back where they camped," Dig said reflectively.

"Well, they haven't camped but once since they robbed us, and that's sure. That was for their noon bite. Where that was we have no idea. We just have to watch them!"

Both boys were excited by the adventure of the evening and Chet declared that he could not sleep at all; so he took the first watch. He heard nothing of the two men but he noted that their fire was kept burning brightly.

Dig was not unfaithful to his duty during the last of the night, either; but he awoke Chet about dawn by shaking him vigorously.

"Hi! come alive!" urged the slangy youngster in a hoarse whisper.

"What's the matter?" demanded Chet, sitting up.

"Those fellows are getting ready to move out. If you want to follow them, we have got to get a move on."

Dig already had the coffee over the fire and the meat ready for broiling. It seemed that the other camp had been astir for some time. The sky was growing light and Tony had brought up the horses.

"I have an idea they'll try to get away from us," Chet said. "But we'll fool them. Hero and Poke can travel twice as much trail in a day as those sorry ponies they have."

"Right!" agreed Dig.

The boys had only enough water in their canteens for breakfast—none for the horses, or for their own ablutions. "We'll wait till we reach the first water-hole," Chet advised. "Cinch on the saddles, Dig."

They had time to eat a good breakfast, however. But Dig grumbled over one thing.

"I'd give a dollar for a hunk of bread!" he declared.

"We'll appreciate white-flour bread all the more when we get it again," his chum told him.

Suddenly the boys saw the two men clamber into their saddles. They started back for the edge of the timber. Chet and Dig were ready and quickly fastened their blanket-rolls upon their saddles. They led their mounts to the open plain.

There they saw Steve and Tony cantering away in an easterly direction, taking the back track.

"They're going back to that camp of theirs where Steve says he lost the deeds, Dig," Chet declared eagerly. "Come on!"

"I'm with you," agreed his chum and spurred the black horse after the bay.

They had not gone a mile when the men looked back and saw that they were pursued. The boys did not draw near to them but they showed a dogged intention of keeping on their trail.

"That Steve-man is madder'n a hatter," chuckled Dig. "He don't like our company a little bit."

The men drew in their horses and glared back at the trail boys. The latter stopped their mounts as well and sat calmly, waiting. The men were in eager and angry conference. It was plain that they did not wholly agree as to their future course.

Finally Steve jerked his pony around and cantered away toward the southwest. Tony followed more slowly, and evidently against his will. The boys waited until they were some distance off, and then turned their own horses in the same direction.

"If I knew where they had camped yesterday noon

— this side of the river, of course — I'd say, let's go there and search the camping place," said Chet thoughtfully. "But it would take too long to find the place, and meanwhile the scoundrels might be riding hard for Grub Stake and fooling us. For there's always the chance that that fellow Steve has the deeds, after all."

"They weren't on him, that's sure," remarked Digby.

"He might even have had them hidden in that hollow log. We didn't think to search it," Chet rejoined. "No! our best course is to keep watch of them."

"Come on, then," said his chum, tightening Poke's rein. "They're getting a good way in the lead."

There was not much chance of the rascals getting away from them, however. Not for the first few hours, at least. The strip of timber they soon rode through was not very wide, and out upon the other side the open plain faced them again.

All the time the quarry was bearing off toward the Grub Stake trail. The mining town, Chet figured, could not be much more than fifty miles away now. They had come west a long way since first seeing the herd of buffaloes that had toled them off

the trail and caused Dig to abandon his friend, the maverick.

“If they are going to Grub Stake we’ll be able to put a spoke in their wheel with Mr. Morrisy,” said Chet. “We’ll hope Steve hasn’t the deeds any more than we have. Of course, my recommendation to the Wells Fargo Express Company was with the deeds, too; but my description doesn’t fit either of those rascals, I hope — nor can they sign my name. Father’s money will be safe.”

“It puzzles me why they are going at all, if they haven’t the papers,” Dig observed.

“Maybe they are going for grub. They can’t have much — and a mighty poor outfit for camping, anyway. I didn’t see any meat in their camp last night,” Chet said.

“That might be the reason. Well, we need some stuff ourselves. I hope they lead us straight to town.”

CHAPTER XXVI

“THE KING OF THEM ALL”

FOLLOWING the two men who had robbed them, but who had been later overcome by the chums, was, as Dig announced, a tame sort of job. The mounts of the trail boys were so much superior to the ponies ridden by the men, that there was little danger of the pursued outwitting the pursuers on the open plain.

But before many hours the course followed would bring the two parties into a hilly country, and Chet well knew that then they would have to be sharp to keep directly on the men's trail.

“Just the same, we can read signs pretty well,” he told his chum; “and by riding close to them I don't believe that Steve can beat us. I'm sure Tony is too clumsy to hide his trail at all.”

“He's strong as an ox, though,” said Dig, reflectively. “We must be mighty careful, Chet, that Tony never comes to a clinch with either of us. If he does — good-bye!”

"We mustn't let either get within pistol range," Chet said quietly. "We know that already."

It was, indeed, rather a delicate situation. The boys were not at all sure that the thieves would not do them bodily harm if they got the chance. Two boys certainly would be no match for two men if they came together unarmed.

But their superior mounts and superior weapons gave the chums considerable confidence, if it did not reduce their caution. Even Dig was tempted to take no risks in approaching the villains.

Every mile they travelled brought the high hills nearer. Their outline was rugged and the forest that clothed their sides for the most part, thick. Somewhere up in those hills was the site of Grub Stake.

When the men stopped for a noonday rest and lunch, so did the boys. Fortunately it was beside a stream, so the two camps did not have to be near together. But Tony Traddles had the impudence to come somewhat near the chums and shout:

"Say! you boys have had plenty of luck hunting. Ain't you got more meat than you want? We ain't seen even a grouse."

“Tell him ‘No,’ ” whispered Digby. “The cheek of him!”

But Chet saw that they would have to throw away some of the buffalo steaks if they were not soon eaten. The weather was too hot to carry fresh meat far in a blanket-roll. So he said:

“Let’s give them some. It won’t hurt us.”

“Huh! no, but I hope it will choke them,” growled Dig. “Giving sustenance to the enemy. Very bad judgment, Chet.”

“Oh, well,” said his chum and started with a couple of big steaks to meet Tony.

“I’ll keep a gun in my hand,” said Dig, behind him. “I wouldn’t trust that Tony as far as I could swing an elephant by the tail!”

But the man received the meat with some expressions of gratitude. “I ain’t in with this sharp,” he whispered to Chet, and pointing with his thumb over his shoulder at the man Steve, “for any money, or like o’ that. I didn’t know just what he was after till he’d got them papers off’n you.”

“Well, he got them,” said Chet shortly.

“But he ain’t got ’em now,” said the fellow, with a quick grin. “The chump lost ’em — somewhere.”

Chet distrusted Tony Traddles; and he suspected

that this all might have been arranged for the purpose of trying to throw him and Dig off the track. So he said nothing, returning to his own camp.

They spent some time beside the stream; but as soon as the other party saddled their horses, the boys got ready to leave, too. Steve seemed in an ugly humour and Chet and Dig heard him threatening Tony.

“ ‘When thieves fall out, honest men may get their dues,’ is an old saying,” whispered Chet. “Listen! Maybe we can hear something.”

But they heard nothing of consequence. In ten minutes both parties were on horseback and trailing across the plain. There were many clumps of trees now, and the plain was cut up with gullies and rocky eminences which both parties wished to shun.

They raised several coveys of grouse and Chet brought down two brace with his pistol. Dig tried to emulate his chum and was bitterly disgusted at the result.

“Waugh!” he grunted. “I couldn’t hit the broad side of a barn with a cannon firing shrapnel. I don’t see how you do it, Chet.”

“Practice—practice, my boy,” quoth his chum.

“Say!” ejaculated Dig. “Those fellows are

watching. Hope they see what you do with a pistol, and overlook my work.”

“That Steve What-is-it saw me shoot that hawk the other day. I guess he knows that we’re good shots. And of course Tony Traddles knows we’re not tenderfeet.”

The boys saw Tony blaze away with his rifle several times at the birds, but they didn’t see a feather fly. Hitting a bird on the wing with a rifle is no easy task, at best. Chet’s work with the six-shooter was the result of long practice and a certain aptitude that the boy had originally possessed.

If the men were out of meat it looked as though they would go hungry to bed, for no other game appeared in the course of the afternoon’s ride. Evening was already approaching and Dig began to grumble because Tony and Steve did not seek a camp.

“This being paced by a pair of irresponsible chumps like them, is no fun. Who knows,” he said, “but they may keep on all night.”

“Not on those horses they are riding,” declared Chet firmly. “They’ve been ridden hard already, and they are about giving out.”

“That’s so, too,” Dig hastened to agree. “I hate

to see a pony punished the way those fellows are punishing their mounts. They ought to be jailed for that, if for nothing else."

The men had headed up the long slope of a low hill. It was timbered, but scantily; and there were many rocks cropping out of the soil. The boys had not seen water lately and they were anxious to refresh their horses and themselves.

"I hope there's a spring on the far side of this hill," Chet said.

"Say! there's something over there!" exclaimed his chum. "Look at Tony!"

The big, hairy man had turned in his saddle and was vigorously beckoning the boys on. He was undoubtedly excited by something he saw beyond the hill, on the summit of which he and his partner now were.

"What do you suppose he wants?" queried Chet doubtfully.

"Don't know. See! they're both looking over there —"

Dig prepared to ride on, but Chet stayed him. "Have a care, boy," he said. "Those fellows aren't above playing some trick on us."

"I know they're not above it," grinned Digby.

“But I don’t believe they can get us in the open like this.”

“Just lay your rifle across your saddle forks. Be ready with it — and let them see that you are ready.”

“All right,” agreed his chum, and in that way — with rifles in hand — the two boys rode up toward the men they had trailed all day. Steve turned and saw their caution and his grin was sardonic. But Tony was too excited to notice the muzzles of the heavy rifles pointing his way as the boys rode up to the summit of the hill.

The hairy man did not shout to them, but gestured and beckoned. For that reason Chet suspected that he had sighted game and wanted their help in securing it. Even Steve was eagerly watching what lay beyond the hill.

Chet pressed off to one side, so that they were a short pistol-shot away from the men. There was a thicket just over the summit of the rise that screened the horsemen from anything in the valley below; but the men and boys could see through this thicket clearly enough to overlook the whole plain.

“There they are! Cricky, Chet!” whispered Dig, the first to spy the game. “Buffaloes again. And Chet — look! There’s the king of them all!”

Grazing below them was the royal game they had already chased, and the huge bull was with them. Chet swiftly counted them and found fifteen. It was the same herd they had seen before and from which they had already taken toll of the robe and horns Dig carried behind his saddle.

This was a steep hillside they looked down, and the valley between it and the next rise was narrow. It was, indeed, like a pocket in the hills, and the opposite wall of the pocket was even steeper than this one.

It was an ideal grazing ground for the herd, however. There was abundant grass, a limpid stream ran through the valley, and there was plenty of shade. Chet knew enough about the habits of the huge animals to know that they would not move from such a feeding ground before morning, at least, unless they were frightened.

"By all the hoptoads that were chased out of Ireland!" quoth Dig, in awe, "isn't that bull a huge one? Did you ever dream of anything like him, Chet?"

"No. He's the biggest thing I ever saw," acknowledged his chum.

"We didn't see him to such advantage before,"

murmured Dig. "Oh cricky! how I'd like to catch him!"

"*Catch* him!" exclaimed Chet. "*Shoot* him, you mean."

"U-h-huh!" grunted Dig. "Maybe." Then, with a grin: "But I roped that little maverick — why not that buster down there?"

Chet took this as one of Dig's jokes. He swerved a little toward the men and when he was near enough he spoke:

"It's too near dark to stalk those fellows to-night. If they're not startled they'll be right there in the morning. Better chance to shoot one then."

"All right, Chet," said Tony easily. "You're the doctor. We ain't got guns that are re'lly fit to put up against them beasts. But you've got the rifles all right. You've killed one o' them already."

"Yes. And give us half a chance and we'll kill another," the boy said. "Where you going to camp? That stream either rises back in that timber, or some springs that feed it have their rise there."

"It's a good place — and gives us shelter, too," Tony said.

Steve would not even look at the boys, but he

headed his tired horse for the grove in question. Dig rode close to Chet and whispered:

“You give them the choice of camps. What’ll we do?”

“We’ll put up with what we can get. I don’t propose to let them get situated where they can look down on us.”

“Oh! I see,” returned his chum, marveling.

The men had the grace to camp some ways down the hill beside a clear rill. That gave the chums a chance to establish themselves at the head of the run, where the spring bubbled out from under the roots of a gigantic tree. It was a beautiful spot, and, had the boys not been so worried, and so doubtful of their neighbours, they would have considered this an ideal camping place.

Just as they had the horses picketed and their own fire burning, Dig saw Tony ascending the hill. “Here comes that big oaf,” he muttered to Chet. “Look out for him.”

But Tony’s hands were empty and he came along with a foolish kind of grin on his face.

“Don’t you boys git too previous and shoot at me,” he called. “I ain’t aimin’ to hurt you none. I’m jest comin’ a-borryin’.”

"Borrowing what?" asked Chet.

"Say! you've borrowed enough from us, I should think!" ejaculated Dig, with disgust.

"Well! you shouldn't have such a temptin' outfit," and Tony chuckled. He had stopped at a distance, however, for Chet had loosened the six-shooter in his belt and the man respected the hint.

"What do you want to borrow, Tony?" asked Chet quietly.

"Why, I tell ye frank an' open, boys," he said, "we want meat an' we want it bad. If you shoot one o' them buffalo you'll give us some, won't ye?"

"All you want," replied Chet shortly. "We had to leave most of the other carcass to the wolves."

"Well, that's han'some of ye," agreed Tony. "I don't suppose ye have more than ye want right now, have ye?" he added sheepishly. "Ter tell ye the truth —"

"Which must be hard telling for you, Tony!" broke in Dig.

"Ter tell ye the truth," went on the big man, without noticing Dig's remark, "we ain't got a smitch o' meat left."

"Say! we've given him enough," growled Dig, looking at Chet.

“We don’t need both these brace of birds,” said Chet, who was skinning the grouse. “Let’s not be piggish.”

“Piggish! by the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland!” gasped his chum. “Are you going to support these lazy thieves all the rest of the way to Grub Stake?”

Tony came nearer and put a hand beside his mouth, as he whispered:

“Mebbe we ain’t goin’ right away to Grub Stake. You want to watch us close’t if ye expect to keep in our company.”

“What do you mean, Tony?” demanded Chet, as he tossed the man a pair of the plump birds.

But the fellow would say no more. He only looked sly and grinned in his silly way. When he wanted to be obstinate, as Dig said, Tony Traddles was the equal of any mule.

CHAPTER XXVII

DIG'S GREAT IDEA

"WHAT do you reckon that nuisance meant?" demanded Digby Fordham the minute Tony Traddles was out of hearing.

"He was hinting at something. Whether he meant to help us, or confuse us, I do not know," confessed Chet.

"He said they were not going to Grub Stake."

"Not at once."

"Well! where the dickens are they going, then?" demanded the disgusted Dig.

"I don't know. Unless the story of that Steve's having lost the deeds is true, and he means to try to slip us and go back to the place where he thinks he dropped them."

"He'll have a hot time slipping us," the other boy said boastfully.

"I don't know. He evidently knows this country better than we do."

"That's easy, for we don't know it at all!" exclaimed Dig.

296 The Trail Boys of the Plains

"Well, there may be a chance for them to fool us in these rocky hills. Maybe this proposal for a buffalo hunt is just for that purpose."

"Not if they need meat so badly as they seem to," remarked the other boy, with more thoughtfulness than he usually displayed.

"I see!" exclaimed Chet quickly. "You think they'll wait to provision themselves before they take the back trail?"

"Yes."

"I'd just like to know," Chet murmured.

He was rather silent all through supper. They could look right down into the other camp and see the two rascals moving about their own fire. The night was still and the air very sweet. They were not troubled by gnats much, either, and the horses were not restless.

Dig rolled into his blanket early. Chet did not put more fuel on the coals, for he did not want the men below to see his movements. They kept up a good fire for some time, however.

The boy knew the men were talking, for occasionally the breeze brought to him the sound of their voices. Dig slept like a top, and Chet slipped out of the camp, passed near the horses to see that they

were all right, and then, pistol in belt, crept quietly down the hillside.

Eavesdropping was not a game he loved to play; but the situation seemed to call for it. If he could learn something about the plans of the two rascals, it might help him decide his own course. For Chet Havens felt deeply the responsibility that circumstances had thrust upon him.

He was naturally a thoughtful boy, and when his father had talked so seriously to him regarding the errand to Grub Stake, Chet had no idea that he would fail in any particular to fulfil his father's wishes.

It was farthest from his thoughts (as it probably was from Mr. Havens') that anybody would attempt to steal the deeds from Chet. The boy accused himself of having been careless, however; in no other way could the deeds have been taken from him.

Now he must get them back if it was a possible thing. Chet was prepared to run into some danger, if necessary, to accomplish this end. Therefore he crept near to the scoundrels' camp and chanced a fight with them if they should find him there.

They did not seem to be discussing anything of

298 The Trail Boys of the Plains

much moment to Chet, however, when he first established himself behind a tree within a few feet of the campfire. Tony was speaking:

“Well! we gotter have some o’ that buffalo meat — that’s all there is to it.”

“If those boys kill one,” sneered Steve.

“Oh, they’ll kill one all right,” said Tony, with confidence. “You’ve seen what they can do with a gun — ’specially that Chet Havens. He’s a crack-a-jack!”

“Oh, I see,” grumbled the other man. “Confound ’em! If it wasn’t for their guns I’d drive ’em out of the country easy.”

“Well, wait till we can load up with some grub before taking the back track; that’s what I say,” growled Tony, puffing on his eternal pipe.

“You think altogether too much of your stomach, Tony,” complained the other man.

“Why shouldn’t I think of it? Nobody else is goin’ to,” declared the hairy one, philosophically. “Tony Traddles has had to look after his own self since he was knee high to a hoppergrass. Ain’t nobody cared a continental for him — no, sir! Old man Havens chucked him out’n his job like he was a dawg.”

"And I should think you'd be sore on this son of his, for it," observed Steve.

"Huh! I try ter be. But them boys are such smart rascals! They kin shoot an' foller a trail, an' all that. They are free-handed, too."

"There we get right back to Tony's stomach again," snarled the other man. "You make me sick!"

"Well, it don't make me sick to pick the bones of a fat bird that somebody else has shot," quoth Tony Traddles. "And you ain't so much!" he added, with some peevishness. "You said if you got them papers from the kid you'd make a hunk of money, and I should have some of it. And then you go and lose 'em — if you lost 'em."

"Oh, I lost 'em all right," returned Steve, "or I'd not be knocking around this country with a couple of boys tagging me."

"And you think you can find 'em?" queried Tony.

"I believe I can. And I want to shake these kids so as to do it. When I slipped into the river as we swam the horses from that island, I flung my coat ashore to keep it dry. Remember?"

"Yes."

"That's when I lost the deeds. The packet fell

300 The Trail Boys of the Plains

out of my pocket right then. I was in too much of a hurry getting that crazy pony ashore to think of anything else."

"Well! it's a long way back," remarked Tony. "And I insist on getting meat first. You can't shoot game with your pistol, and this old gun of mine ain't much good. I told you so in the first place."

"If we wait for these boys to shoot something, we'll have to kill another day," grumbled Steve. "We can only slip out and leave 'em in the dark."

"Then make it to-morrow night," said Tony, with decision, and he rolled over and knocked the heel out of his pipe into the fire.

Chet stole away from the encampment of the two rascals within a few minutes. Tony had pillowed his head on his arm and gone to sleep. It was Steve's first watch.

The boy had heard enough of importance to show him that his suspicions were upheld. The man really had lost the deeds which he had stolen.

He had not discovered the loss, in all probability, until he was made prisoner and searched by the two boys. At once his mind had gone back to his adventure on the shore of the river, now mentioned to Tony Traddles.

Chet was confident that he knew what river was meant. It was the shallow stream in which the men had striven to hide their trail just after they had robbed Chet and Dig. The former believed the island spoken of must be below the ford at which he and his chum last crossed.

"I could turn back and find that place — pretty nearly — in a day and a half," thought Chet. "That's where the fellows aimed for when they started out the morning after we captured them.

"Our sticking to their trail made them turn this way. Steve is going to try to throw us off and go back to find the papers. *Why not beat him to it?*"

Chet had sufficient food for reflection to keep him wide awake during his vigil. He let the fire die out and he kept back in the darkness, watching the other camp continually. He saw Steve move about occasionally; but the fellow did not offer to come up the hill; and as for Tony, by the way he had gone to sleep, Chet was quite sure he would not be easily aroused.

When Chet awoke his chum and partner he said nothing about what he had overheard at the other camp. Only, he advised his friend to watch the man below them closely.

302 The Trail Boys of the Plains

“ I’ll keep my eye on him, all right,” promised Dig. “ B-r-r-r! it’s cold! What did you let the fire go out for, Chet?”

“ It’s safer. You can see better without the light flickering in your eyes. And you can stir around and keep warm,” said Chet. “ It’s me that’s got to lie cold. Wake me up in good season, now.”

Dig obeyed that last request. He roused Chet just as soon as the dawn streaked the eastern sky. Dig Fordham was excited, too.

“ Whew, Chet!” he whispered. “ I’ve thought up the greatest scheme!”

“ What is it?” demanded Chet, yawning. “ My! but you did get me up early enough, in all good conscience!”

“ Don’t be a lazybones. The coffee is made,” said Dig. “ And don’t forget that we’re to have another crack at the buffalo.”

“ Yes? Well, maybe.”

“ Whew! where’s your enthusiasm?” demanded Dig, disappointed.

“ Wait till I get the stickers out of my eyes,” said Chet, going to the full spring.

After he had ducked his head into the cold water,

and scrubbed his face and hands and behind his ears, he felt more awake to the situation.

"What's the wonderful idea, Dig?" he mumbled, as he rubbed himself dry on the towel he had had wisdom enough to bring along. Camping out without a towel is simply punishment; and it was easy enough to dry the towel in the sun while they ate breakfast.

"I reckon you don't want to hear about it," grumbled Dig.

"Oh, go on! I was half asleep. What have you been conjuring up, old man?"

"Why, it's about those buffaloes," Dig whispered, as though he feared somebody would hear him besides Chet. "Rather about the big bull."

"Well?"

"Let's capture him!" exclaimed Dig.

"Huh? Oh, yes, another joke. Put salt on his tail?"

"By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland!" declared Dig earnestly, "this is a good thing."

"I don't see how you're going to capture a creature as big as an elephant — and twice as mad."

304 The Trail Boys of the Plains

"That's where my scheme comes in."

"Explain! explain!" urged Chet, spreading the towel on a bush.

"Why, I'll tell you: Just as soon as it began to grow light this morning I saw Tony lie down and go to sleep. His partner was dead to the world, too; so I knew they wouldn't bother us. I took the glasses and went just outside the timber, there, and tried to find the buffaloes."

"They're all right, aren't they?" asked Chet, with interest.

"Sure. They spent the night in one of those small groves down there. They've just begun to come out to graze."

"I see."

"Well, I spied out the whole valley from where I stood. There's a band of antelope further down, too. But we don't care for them."

"Not while the buffaloes are in sight," chuckled Chet.

"Now, listen! Across the valley I saw the openings of two or three narrow gulches — regular pockets in the hill over there."

"Hey!" cried Chet, sitting up both physically and mentally. "What is this, boy?"

"My idea," said Dig, with confidence, "and it's a good one. Those pockets can be made into corrals — at least, one of them can."

"You don't mean it!" exclaimed Chet. "You think we can corral those buffaloes?"

"Maybe the big one. Sell him to some speculator — or a showman," said Dig.

"Say! that would beat all the hoptoads that ever hopped out of Ireland," declared Chet. "Let's have those glasses."

"Wait till you have your breakfast."

"Breakfast be jiggered!" ejaculated Chet. "I want to see what those pockets look like from out yonder. To corral some of those buffaloes! Well! that would beat shooting them, I should think," and he hurried away from the campfire.

CHAPTER XXVIII

GREAT LUCK

THE sweep of the hill-bound vale was visible for ten miles from the hillside where the boys were encamped. They were almost at the head of the valley. The buffaloes grazed five miles below.

The slope of ground bounding the valley on the north and east was too steep to tempt the buffaloes to mount and graze upon it. Of course, once frightened and with better escape shut off, the herd would not refuse to come over this hill. Buffaloes are almost as sure-footed as deer.

The other side of the valley — the south side — was bounded by steep terraces which would have been hard for a man to climb in many places. These steep walls were broken here and there by gashes cut in the hillside by nature in ancient times.

As far as Chet could see, these gulches were not barren. Grass and brush grew plentifully as far up the cuts as he could see, and here and there a tall tree stood, topping the walls of the pocket.

Digby Fordham's suggestion regarding the cap-

ture of some of the buffaloes was well worth attempting. At least, so it seemed to Chet's enthusiastic mind. He was just as eager to try to drive the buffalo herd as was his chum.

He went back to breakfast briskly. Dig had everything all prepared.

"What do you think of it?" he asked doubtfully.

"We'll try it. But we have to fool those two fellows down below there, as well as the buffaloes."

"Why so?" asked Dig curiously.

Chet told him in a low voice while they ate just what he had heard at the other camp the evening before. He believed that Steve was watching for a chance to get away from them; but that, because of Tony's insistence, the two villains would wait until they obtained some meat.

"Tony isn't one to starve uncomplainingly in any cause," Chet said decidedly. "And Steve doesn't want to lose him —"

"Why not? He's not much good to him, seems to me," said Dig.

"Figure out how you'd like to be in the wilderness yourself, all alone," said Chet. "Especially when there is occasion to keep watch. A man can't travel all day and keep watch all night, too."

"I reckon that's so," agreed Dig.

"If for no other reason, Steve needs Tony. They'll keep together. They have had no luck hunting. Haven't the proper guns. They are depending on us —"

"To be their commissary department, eh?" growled Dig.

"That's about it."

"The cheek of 'em!"

"Well, I don't know. As long as we want to keep near them I'd just as soon have them dependent upon us for food," Chet reflected.

"You're still going to follow them, then?"

"To the bitter end," chuckled Chet. "When that fellow goes back for those deeds, I'm going to be right with him."

"I hope he won't fool us," Dig said doubtfully.

"He won't if we keep our eyes open. I hope we are as smart as he is!" exclaimed Chet, with scorn.

"Well! I'm willing to feed them, as I say. But I'm going to give them something to do — and in doing it they'll be right where we can watch them."

"While we're hunting those buffaloes?" asked Dig excitedly.

"Yes, sir! Now listen, and don't interfere."

"I'm an oyster," said Dig promptly.

The men were now astir in the camp below. The boys finished their breakfast and cleared everything away. They packed their outfit as though for a day's march. Then, while Dig watered the horses and fastened the blanket-rolls to the cantles of the saddles, Chet approached the other camp.

"Hey, you fellows!" he called, "if you want any of the buffalo meat that we hope to kill, you've got to help get it."

"Sure, Chet," cried Tony briskly.

"That's understood," said the other man, though not very graciously.

"Want us to drive 'em for you?" queried Tony, who was no bad hunter himself, when he had a good weapon and a decent mount. Both the rifle and the pony he now possessed were wretched.

Chet told them what he desired. He and Dig were going to ride west to head the buffaloes off. They proposed going back over the crown of the hill and entering the valley some miles below the spot where the herd of buffaloes was now feeding.

"Although we'll approach them almost down wind, we'll trust to the speed of our mounts to get in a couple of shots, at least. The whole herd may

tear up this way. But we'll probably wound one, if not two, and they'll lag behind. If you are ready for them, that old rifle of Tony's — even your pistol," and he spoke directly to Steve, "may put the finishing touch to our work."

"Good boy. You're right," said Tony briskly.

"I want you to lengthen your lines with your lariats, and let your ponies drift out into the valley. If the buffaloes are frightened and come on the run, they won't bother about the ponies. You fellows keep down, of course, until the beasts are near. Then up and at them!"

"They'll easily keep out of the range of our guns," said the man Steve, doubtfully.

"Then they'll have to turn back on us," Chet said, confidently. "We'll have them between two fires. That's the only sure way we have of getting one of the beasts. Do you want to do your share?"

"You got the rights of it, Chet," said Tony Tradles. "Sure we agree."

"Speak for yourself!" snarled the other man.

"Well, if you don't want to eat —" began Chet; but Tony broke in with:

"Aw, don't mind him! He's a born sorehead. Of course we want to eat. We'll do like you say."

“Then let’s see you get your horses down there on the plain,” said Chet promptly. “When I see you fixed right, Dig and I will ride around to head the buffaloes off.”

Perhaps Steve saw through Chet’s subterfuge. It would not have taken a very keen man to do so. But he evidently agreed to the proposal because Tony urged it. Tony had an appetite.

The men finished their breakfast (it wasn’t a big one, as the boys well knew) and soon rode down the hill into the grassy valley. Thickets of scrubby trees hid their movements from the grazing animals.

Chet and Dig rode off up the hill; but they did not lose sight of the men whom they so distrusted — not for some time. Through the screen of verdure that topped the long hill, or ridge, the boys could see down into the valley and keep watch of both the men and the grazing buffaloes.

They saw the former reach the last shelter down the valley and there dismount, deposit their goods and saddles, and then rope out their two mounts. As the boys had first stalked the buffaloes several days before, Tony and Steve did now.

Satisfied, Chet and Dig put spurs to their mounts and covered six or seven miles along the wooded

ridge very quickly. Occasionally they spied upon the buffaloes and knew that nothing had disturbed the animals' placidity. They were comfortably grazing on the bottomland.

After viewing the exposed valley through the glasses for some minutes, Chet announced the programme. Dig, although the originator of the scheme to attempt the corralling of some of the buffaloes, was quite willing that his chum should take the lead.

Keeping the screen of wood between them and the view of the buffaloes, the chums descended the steep hillside into the narrow valley. Its mouth was a number of miles west of their position. Directly opposite, and cut into the more abrupt southern wall of the valley, was one of the pockets that Dig had first discovered and pointed out. They rode there to examine it.

The approach to the gulch could not have been arranged better had it been originally intended for a trap for wild animals. In similar pockets in the hills the boys knew many herds of wild mustangs had been caught by hunters in past years. Now the wild horses were almost as scarce as the buffaloes.

On the left hand the hillside was too steep and

rocky for any animal with hoofs willingly to run that way. Sloping up from the waterside on the right hand was a thick hedge of low trees, so closely interwoven that buffaloes, at least, could not burst through the barrier.

The mouth of the pocket was plain, if narrow. It was the only escape in sight — if the herd could be driven this way. Yet the pocket could be closed easily.

On one side stood a thickly branching tree. If it was felled correctly after the animals were enclosed not even the big bull buffalo could make his escape. The chums saw the possibilities of the place with glee.

“Whew!” ejaculated Dig, “it’ll be pie.”

“Couldn’t be better if it were made for us. Now, let’s see if it is really a place in which we can bottle some of the animals.”

“Cricky! we’ll get the whole herd!” boasted Dig.

“Be more modest — be more modest,” urged Chet, laughing. “Wouldn’t you be satisfied with the big bull alone?”

“Would a duck swim?” returned his chum.

They rode into the gully and looked about them.

314 The Trail Boys of the Plains

It was heavily grassed in the bottom; but the sides were almost as steep as a wall. No buffalo — no matter how nimble — could scale those walls.

They rode to the head of the gulch. It was some eighth of a mile deep, and there were several tall trees in it. The soil in the bottom was a rich, alluvial deposit that gave verdure of all kinds deep rootage. And there was a free-flowing spring.

“Pasture here for a hundred head of cattle, I declare,” Dig said. “If we can get those buffaloes in here, they’ll be in clover until we can find the means of capturing or shooting them.”

“And what will Tony and that Steve be doing, I wonder?” Chet said doubtfully.

“Whew! I had forgotten them.”

“They’re a part of the pickle, all right,” Chet said, “and must be figured on.”

“Cricky! it would be a nice note if they not only stole your deeds, but got our buffaloes away from us, too.”

“Beginning already to lay claim to the buffaloes, are you?” returned Chet.

“Well, we saw them first,” declared the other lad.

Feeling that the pocket was secure — if they had the luck to drive the buffaloes this way, Chet laid out

the further plan of action, and Dig agreed. They rode back to the brook, watered their horses, hid their outfit, save the serviceable camp axe and their guns, then cinched up and rode through the brook.

The trail boys were still hidden from the grazing game by thickets of low shrubs. But they knew just where the buffaloes were.

Coming on them from the north side of the valley, Chet hoped to shoot at least one and stampede them across the brook, instead of up the valley toward the spot where the two men were in waiting.

As Dig had said admiringly, Chet was "long-headed." He knew the men wanted some meat, and that was all. If the boys shot a buffalo where the herd now grazed, Steve and Tony would not trouble themselves about the remainder of the buffaloes.

"If we can get the herd across that brook, and headed down stream, we'll stand a good chance of corralling them, Dig," Chet said. "We'll cross the stream, too, keep near enough to head them off from the water, and they'll be likely to take the first opening in the hillside that promises escape. They can't get through the thicket below there, and if we keep them turned south they'll find our pocket."

"Whew! I'm just as excited as I can be," declared

316 The Trail Boys of the Plains

Dig. "Let's get into action. We've played to great luck so far; I hope it doesn't break on us."

"Ha!" laughed Chet. "Remember that there are two things easily broken —glass and luck."

CHAPTER XXIX

PLENTY OF EXCITEMENT

THE best laid plans are not always successfully, or satisfactorily, carried out. There was, as both boys knew, a big doubt as to whether they could drive the buffaloes in the way they desired; but, at least, there was a good chance that they would kill another of the big animals.

“Take a bull, Dig,” advised Chet, as they rode up the brook. “Don’t kill the cows or calves. If we should enclose any of the herd in our corral, besides the big fellow, I believe we’d have a mighty valuable catch.”

“Say! that would be great,” agreed Dig. “Mebbe we could sell ’em for as much as a hundred dollars.”

“And that’s better than selling a little old maverick for five dollars — eh?” laughed his chum.

The boys trotted their eager mounts up the valley and finally came to the last screen of bushes that stood between them and the buffalo herd. The animals were feeding down the valley, but the wind was

not blowing directly in their faces. It was from the southwest; therefore, the odour of the young hunters would not be carried to the beasts.

Chet and Dig again saw the feeding ponies belonging to the two men who had caused them so much trouble. "And maybe we'll put them in a hole before we get through," muttered Dig vindictively.

The boys could be sure that the men were close by, when the ponies were so plainly visible. Neither of them would start back for that island camp on the distant river, afoot.

So the boys gave their full attention to the buffaloes. Their rifles were in trim and everything was ready for the charge. Chet had selected an opening in the thicket; he knew the value of a good start in attacking such nimble animals as the buffaloes had already proven themselves to be.

"Ready, Dig?" Chet asked.

"Let her go!" replied his friend, and at the same moment both horses dashed forward.

They appeared upon the plain at full speed. They were aimed at about the centre of the scattered herd. Could they have trusted the two men, they might have helped with the chase and bunched the whole herd. Instead, it split, and a part of the buffaloes went up

the valley, while the others fled directly from the two boys, toward the stream.

The heavy rifles cracked almost simultaneously. Chet's shot brought a vigorous young bull to his knees; but Dig missed his quarry. He came up and put a ball into Chet's kill, however, while Chet himself put the third bullet through the wounded beast's vitals.

"Come on! come on!" yelled Chet, excitedly, starting Hero on the jump after the part of the herd that was scrambling through the brook.

Dig was after him at once. The boys spread out and their horses took the water-jump splendidly. The mounts were as wildly excited as their masters.

The big bull that had inspired Chet and Dig with such enthusiasm was in the lead. This was a piece of luck that delighted the young trailers.

"We've got him! we've got him!" cried Digby.

"Don't holler — till — you're out — of the — woods!" panted Chet. "Goodness! that big beast looks as though he could go right through a brick wall. Suppose he turns on us?"

"Then you'll see this boy take to his heels," returned Dig, with conviction.

They did not follow the buffaloes too closely; and

they kept on the water side of them, yet near enough so that the frightened animals did not fancy turning to run back along the foot of the southern wall of the valley.

The monster buffalo, head down and whip-like tail twirling, thundered straight on. The thicket of thorny trees was ahead. He couldn't get through that, and he knew it.

Towards the brook, where was easy escape, was likewise a figure on horseback, waving both hands. That was Dig. The big buffalo did not want to go that way.

He wheeled and there, right in front of him, was the welcome opening of the grassy gulch. In a moment he galloped into it. After him galloped seven of the herd—all that had followed him in the stampede.

"Hurrah! We've got 'em!" shrieked Dig, spurring Poke up the hill.

"Keep right before the mouth of that pocket—but outside," cried Chet, throwing himself from the saddle, with the axe in his hand. "Keep Poke moving. Don't let the beasts catch you afoot. If they charge back on us, try to scare them into the gulch again."

"Hot chance I'd have to do that," muttered Dig.

But he held his ground while Chet struck steel to timber with much vigour. Cutting down a tree of this size was no easy task, and well the boy knew it; but he was determined to shut the buffaloes into the pocket in the hill. Once the big tree was felled across the mouth of the gulch he was very sure the herd would be secure.

Chet was no poor woodsman. He could swing an axe as well as a full-grown man, for his father owned a wood-lot near the Silent Sue mine, and Chet for two years had cut and sledded down to the Havens house the winter's wood.

But to hammer at this big tree trunk with a short-handled hatchet was a more difficult task.

Dig had to laugh at him, despite the anxiety they both felt about the buffaloes. "Cricky, Chet! why don't you use your pocketknife?" he demanded. "You'd get it down just as quick."

"Can you suggest any better way?" asked Chet, stopping for breath.

"You might set fire to it," grinned his chum.

"You keep still, or I'll make you come here and spell me," said Chet. "My goodness! but my hand is getting sore."

"You'll have some pretty blisters before you get through with that stunt," said Dig.

And he was truly a prophet! Chet was more than an hour cutting down the tree, but he had used good judgment in placing it and when it fell the mouth of the gulch was so closed that no buffalo could get out. But Chet was lame, bruised, and blistered.

"I declare you had the worst half of the job," Dig said. "But just think, old man! we've captured eight buffaloes, including the king of them all."

"We have them cornered — yes. Now we've got to find somebody either to buy them just as they stand in there, or to help us get them out and to a market."

"Whew! That's so. We've only begun the job, eh?"

"That's right, Dig," Chet replied, nodding his head seriously.

"At any rate," the other boy said, "it's an ideal corral we have 'em in. There is that trickle of water, and plenty of grass and green bushes. 'All the comforts of home.' What buffalo wouldn't be content in such quarters?"

The boys climbed up the hillside, after tethering their horses, and crept along over the rocks above the

pocket until they could see the herd. Strangely enough the big buffalo and his seven companions were feeding quietly and whisking flies at the upper end of the gorge, their panic entirely departed.

"Say! did you ever see a more peaceful scene?" chuckled Digby. "They look as tame as barnyard cattle, don't they?"

"That's all right," replied Chet, "but I'd hate to go down there and try to milk one of those bossies."

The beasts were corralled. Chet wasted little time in congratulating his chum and himself. Luck and foresight had brought about the capture; but it would take something more to make it of any value to the chums. Both the boys realised that.

"We have to get to Grub Stake and interest somebody in our haul," Dig said. "That's the ticket for us."

"And we have something else to do first," Chet replied, as they got back to the horses. "We've left those two rascals, Steve and Tony, too long by themselves. I bet they've hiked out after those lost deeds already."

"What? without their meat?"

"Come on! I reckon the condition of that buffalo we shot will surprise you," said Chet.

And it did. Dig sputtered like an overfilled tea-kettle when they reached the place where they had dropped the young bull.

No animal had been drawn to the kill, although several timid coyotes sneaked out of sight behind the nearest thicket. But the robe was ruined. The body had been slashed right into, without any pains being taken to butcher it properly. The better parts of the carcass had been taken, and the mess that had been made of the remainder sickened the two boys. They cut off a few shoulder steaks, and got away from the spot as soon as possible.

"They got their meat and have hiked out for that island in the river," Chet said, sternly. "That's all they wanted, of course. Steve saw his chance to start now instead of to-night, and he took it."

"We can follow their trail, Chet," exclaimed Dig. "The nasty things! They ruined that buffalo."

"We'll do better than follow their trail," Chet said quickly.

"How's that?"

"I believe I can find that island they spoke of myself. We'll see if we cannot beat them to it, Dig. Certainly we have the advantage of the best mounts, if we don't know the country as well as Steve does."

They recovered their outfit, built a fire, and cooked dinner while their horses rested; then they set out toward the east without paying any attention to the route followed by their two enemies, nor much to the course they had taken in coming to this sheltered valley.

Chet had his compass and he laid as direct a course as he knew for the shallow river in question.

The six remaining members of the buffalo herd were out of sight as the boys rode up the valley. Where they had gone to was a mystery.

"But you can bet Tony and that other fellow are not following them," remarked Dig, in disgust.

"Quite right," responded Chet. "Those scamps have got all they wanted."

"I hope the time will come when we can 'call quits' with 'em," said Dig.

"Hear! hear! Satisfaction is what we're after — and those deeds."

The boys crossed the divide and as they went down the slope, they struck another watercourse which, beginning as a small rill, increased in width and volume of water very rapidly. They were in sight of this stream through the rough country spreading eastward until past mid-afternoon.

By that time they had ridden many miles and were saddle-weary. The horses, too, showed the effect of hard work.

"We'd ought to breathe them awhile," Dig urged, for he was very careful of horseflesh.

"Not yet. I'm sorry for them," Chet said, "but we've got to keep moving just as long as daylight holds, at least. You know, we don't know this country after dark, and that Steve evidently does."

"But we must be travelling almost two miles to their one," Dig said.

"Granted. But they may be going more directly to that island than we," Chet told him. "Though I believe this stream we're following empties into the very river we're in search of."

"We never saw this creek before."

"No. It's a good deal farther south than the way we came with those rascals."

"Well! I reckon you know, Chet."

"I know the points of the compass," returned his friend. "The sun doesn't fool us."

"Of course — we're going toward Silver Run again, not toward Grub Stake."

"Quite right. And goodness!" added Chet, "we

are spending a lot more time in this trip than I expected to. I wonder what father will say?"

"Say! It's been a lot different from what I expected. Whew! but we have worked, Chet."

"Aren't you just right?" and Chet looked sadly at his blistered palms.

They rode hard and were weary and hungry long before sundown. The chums did not talk much — they seemed to be talked out. The uncertainty of the errand they rode on, and what they had already gone through, made both boys sober. There had been excitement enough, certainly, on this journey. They had been in peril and had taken part in sturdy adventure — enough in the past few days to satisfy most boys for a year.

"We were looking for a little fun on the trail," Chet said reflectively. "But, my goodness, Dig! we certainly have got more than we bargained for."

"Yes, and it isn't ended," responded his chum, shaking his head. "Wait till we meet up with that Steve and Tony again — if we do!"

"That doesn't bother me so much as the chances, for and against, of our meeting up with those lost deeds. That's what's troubling yours truly," said Chet.

CHAPTER XXX

HOW IT ENDED

IN the dim dusk of late evening the trail boys suddenly came down to the river bank. They were leading their mounts, for the way was so rough they did not want to risk a misstep on the faithful creatures' part in the dark.

As Chet Havens expected, the stream they had followed so long — almost from the valley where they had corralled the buffaloes — fell into the wide but shallow river they had crossed several days before on the trail of the thieves.

The horses' sides were heaving and their heads hung almost to the ground; but Chet, as leader of the expedition, was not willing to allow them much rest.

"Just a mouthful of grass and a drink of water after it," he said to his chum. "We must wait for our supper until later."

"All right as far as we are concerned, Chet," said the other boy, more seriously than was his wont. "But I don't want you to forget one important fact."

“What’s that?”

“These horses have been grain fed until we brought them out on this trip. We have ridden them mighty hard, Chet — mighty hard. They are beginning to suffer now. Grass for a grain fed horse is like feeding a man on breakfast food when he’s been used to a meat diet. The man will quickly give out, and so will the horse.”

“I’m sorry,” said his chum. “You know more about it than I do, Dig, I admit. But I feel that I just must push on up this river till I reach that island. I want to get there before those scamps do. If there is any such thing as finding the lost deeds, I want to be on the ground first.”

“Uh-huh! I’m on to your desire, Chet. But have a heart for the horses — do!”

“You stay here and rest Poke, then,” said Chet. “I’ll have to punish poor Hero. I’m sorry; but I must get on.”

“Well!” retorted Dig, “you don’t suppose I’d let you go alone, do you?”

“I believe I can handle those two fellows. Tony is only foolish,” Chet said, with confidence — perhaps expressing a larger share than he really possessed.

"Well, you can bet your bottom dollar!" exclaimed the slangy Dig, "that you are not going to tackle them alone. I'm with you to the end of the dock, old man — and we'll jump off together.

"Say!" he added, "how far up the river do you think the island is?"

"I believe we must be all of twenty miles below the crossing to which we trailed those fellows in the first place. But how far this side of that crossing the island is, I don't know. We'll just have to go up stream till we come to it."

"Suppose there are several islands?" suggested Dig.

"Oh, don't!" exclaimed Chet. "Don't suggest more trouble. I'm just as worried about those deeds as I can be."

Chet gave the horses half an hour on the grass; then they cinched on the saddles so the animals wouldn't drink too much, and were soon splashing up the shallow edge of the stream. At this time of the year, save in certain holes, the stream ran very shoal indeed. The way was smoother on the beach than on the prairie above.

"Besides," Chet said, in a low tone, "we can't be seen down here. Even our hats aren't above the

edge of the bank. Anybody riding on the plain would not know we were here, unless near enough to hear the horses splashing along."

"Those fellows have never got over here so soon on their miserable cayuses — take it from me," Dig urged.

Nevertheless, Chet's mind was in a turmoil as they rode on. The sunset faded; but the stars shone brilliantly over the plains that night — big, and sparkling, just as they do at sea. The chums from Silver Run did not lack for light.

It was nine o'clock when they spied the wooded island in the river which Chet believed must be the site of the camp of which Steve and Tony had spoken. The water grew suddenly deep, too, and the boys had to force their tired horses out upon the sandy shore.

Chet remembered that Steve had spoken of having hard work swimming his pony ashore from the island, and he believed this must be the place for which they had been searching.

"We'll halt here, boy," he said to Dig. "There's some greasewood up there. You make the fire and I'll hobble the nags. The water must be very shallow on the other side of this island. Those thieves

rode easily out to it from the east bank of the river, and then had to swim their ponies over here."

"Sure!" agreed Dig.

"It was somewhere along here Steve thinks he dropped the packet of papers he stole from me. Keep your eyes open."

"You bet you!" exclaimed his chum, going to work at once to make a fire under the shelter of the bank.

They had their welcome supper as soon as it could be cooked, and then Dig took the first watch. He patrolled the camp on the bank overlooking it, so that he might see all about upon the plain. Their enemies must come from this direction.

The men, however, did not appear during Dig's watch. The boys had travelled very rapidly, and the sorry beasts ridden by Steve and Tony could not have brought them very fast on the trail to the river.

Chet, however, spied them before dawn. The stars were just beginning to pale when two hazy figures loomed out of a distant thicket, and the boy made them out to be two mounted men. He soon heard them talking, too, for the sound of voices carried far in the damp air.

The boy was excited; but he felt that he had the

situation well in hand. He awoke Dig, and ordered him to keep quiet until the men rode nearer. Then the chums stepped out upon the bank boldly and hailed the travellers.

“We’re here first, you fellows,” Chet said. “And we have located a claim all up and down this creek. Don’t come any nearer, for if you do I shall shoot your ponies — and I’m sure you don’t want to be left afoot out here in the open.”

Both men burst into ejaculations of anger and disappointment. But Tony’s anger seemed aimed at his companion.

“What did I tell ye?” he cried. “Didn’t I say these lil’ boys of Havens’ and Fordham’s was too smart for us? Now I’m goin’ ter hike out for the trail an’ git to some man’s town — you hear me? You ain’t nothin’ but a frost, Mr. Steve Brant — that’s what you be.”

As for the leading rascal, his hard words could not hurt the chums. He retired with Tony, and they made camp far up stream — at least two rifle-shots away. The boys, however, never lost sight of them.

As the light increased, Chet began to search the shore of the river. Had there been a rain since they had come over it, the level of the water would have

risen and washed out the marks of the pony's struggles where Steve Brant had got him ashore. In this dry time, however, it was easy for the boy to discover just the spot.

And, strange as it seemed, the packet of papers was right there, too. Nothing had disturbed the papers. The packet lay under the bank half hidden by a bunch of weeds, and all the papers were intact, as Chet very soon made sure.

"Cricky! aren't you the lucky boy?" cried Dig, when he saw them.

"I'm very grateful that I found them," his chum said, soberly. "And let me tell you that nobody's going to pry them away from me again with anything less than a crowbar. This losing of the deeds has been the most worrisome thing that I hope will ever happen to me."

"And we've had about as exciting a time as I suppose we ever shall have," added Dig, shaking his head.

Both boys, however, were somewhat mistaken in these prognostications, as the sequel will show, for we hope to meet Chet and Dig again in another volume, to be called, "The Trail Boys in the Gold Fields; Or, The Search For the Lost Nugget."

They saddled their horses soon after finding the packet and rode away from the vicinity of the villains' camp. Their mounts were refreshed and, considering the condition of the men's ponies, the boys were very sure that they could keep ahead of Steve and Tony Traddles all the way to Grub Stake.

Chet insisted on following the river down-stream till they struck the Grub Stake trail, although Dig was eager to go back by the way of the gulch in which they had corralled the buffaloes.

"We've fooled away enough time on this journey already," Chet said decisively. "Why, Dig! to-day is Sunday. We've been a week on the trail. We must hurry."

"Whew! I'd like to see if those creatures are safe."

"They're safe enough. Nobody will roll that tree away — not even our friends back yonder. We'll hurry on to town and see what arrangements we can make for selling the whole herd."

"By the last hoptoad that was chased out of Ireland!" ejaculated Dig, vigorously. "If you do that, Chet Havens, you'll be the very smartest fellow I ever met!"

"I bet we can sell the buffaloes a whole lot more

easily than you could have sold that little old Stone Fence you started to bring along," laughed his chum.

And so it proved. The boys reached the regular trail to Grub Stake without mishap, and on Monday evening rode into the mountain mining town and put up at the best hotel. After more than a week on the trail they were glad to get a bath and crawl in between sheets again.

Tuesday morning Chet went to the express office, identified himself, made arrangements for the payment of his father's money to the owner of a certain share in the Crayton claim, and then hunted up Mr. John Morrisy.

The chums found him to be a very pleasant old man, if illiterate. After their business with him was transacted, Mr. Morrisy, who had heard the story of the boys' adventures, found the very man for them who was willing to invest in a herd of buffaloes.

This man agreed to pay the boys a hundred dollars in cash on the ground where the buffaloes were corralled. Of course, the beasts were worth a great deal more; but the boys were not prepared to transport them to any market. There was a public-spirited citizen farther east who was willing to pay

well for live buffaloes and this man at Grub Stake was acting as his agent.

He gathered together a party of old cattlemen and various paraphernalia, and all set out with the boys for the valley in which the herd was confined. On the way out of Grub Stake they met Tony Traddles and Steve Brant, coming in.

Tony, when he heard what the expedition meant, asked the boss for a job and got it, for he was a husky looking fellow and said he was anxious to work. He parted company with Steve Brant with no apparent regret on either side.

Brant himself, the chums learned, was a man who went about the mining country picking up claims cheap and reselling them to eastern capitalists. He had been suspected of "salting" some of these claims, and he might have intended to salt the Crayton claim when he was at work there.

However, neither the boys nor Mr. Havens were ever troubled by the fellow again. The signing of the deed by Mr. John Morrisy settled that. The old claim was controlled by Mr. Havens; and if ever anything of value should come from the mine, it would belong to him.

The party of bison hunters found the big old bull

338 The Trail Boys of the Plains

and his seven comrades just as the boys had left them. The men praised Chet and Dig highly for their work in corralling the beasts. And when the head of the expedition saw the size of the big buffalo, he added a ten dollar bill to the agreed price he paid the happy boys.

Chet and Dig could not wait to see the bison snared; they had been too long from home now. So they pushed for the train and cantered a long day's travel toward Silver Run before they pulled up.

Then, riding down into a sandy bottom they suddenly heard some creature bawling. Dig looked all about, noting the landmarks, and suddenly exclaimed:

“By *all* the hoptoads that were chased out of Ireland! It's Stone Fence!”

He dismounted instantly and found the calf in the thicket nearby. Whether it was glad to see the boys or not it suffered itself to be roped and this time it led very peaceably. In spite of anything Chet could say, Dig was determined to take the maverick home with him.

That is how it came about that the two friends rode into the outskirts of Silver Run with a little red yearling trailing behind them and “blatting its head

off," as Dig expressed it. Everybody made comments upon it; but that did not disturb Digby Fordham.

"I feel just like a brother towards this dogy," he confessed. "Come on, Stone Fence! Lift your heels!"

At Hardpan the boys came upon a curious sight. There was an exciting game of baseball going on in the empty lot. A nine of pure-blood Indians, captained by Amoshee, the lame Cheyenne, was matched against a scrub team of the neighbourhood boys, and, as Dig inelegantly put it, "the redskins were licking the socks off the white boys."

"I bet Amoshee is going after the scalps of the high school nine — and serve 'em right!" Chet said. "Those Indians can play some; can't they?"

Finally the trail boys arrived at home, and were welcomed by their parents and friends. They had had more than a week of adventures on the trail, had accomplished an important errand satisfactorily, and, secretly, were hoping for other adventures during their vacation.

THE END

656 1





LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



00021238491